

PRICE 5 CENTS

OLD SLEUTH WEEKLY

No. 164

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The MYSTERY of the UPPER ROOM



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DRIED ON THE WOOD!"
DECLARED THE DETECTIVE.

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A Series of

THE MOST THRILLING DETECTIVE STORIES EVER PUBLISHED

No. 164

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VOL. IV

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The Mystery of The Upper Room,

or

Detective Crawley's Trail of Blood

BY "OLD SLEUTH"

PRINCIPAL CHARACTERS IN THIS STORY.

JIM CRAWLEY—The detective, who has started off on a vacation with a doctor friend, and is held up on the very first morning, with a perplexing problem facing him, to be solved.

DR. FERGUS HOLMES—The weary physician, who shares the flight of Crawley, hoping to find rest in a motor trip through the country.

GEORGE VAN ALSTINE—A millionaire broker, who is found strangely dead in an upper room of a country hotel one morning in summer; and about whose taking off the mystery hangs.

M'SIU ANTON—The proprietor of the road house, known as the *Black Cat*, famous for its dinners among notorists, a stout man who has troubles of his own, even before this tragedy threatens to ruin his business.

RUDOLPH—The son of M'siu's second wife, a tiger whelp, who

made a name for himself among the Apaches of Paris, and has come home to die.

BOB ANNESTON—A young newspaper man, who finds himself mixed up in the affairs of the roadside inn by reason of several facts that link his fortunes with those who sojourney there.

MARIE—The girl in the case, for there must always one appear; in this case she is the niece of the innkeeper, and more than that to Anneston.

ANNETTE—The wife of the landlord, whose one fear seems to be that her son will follow in the footsteps of his father, and meet a like fate.

ASA TRENCH—The leader of a gang of counterfeiters, who for a time seems to be linked with the grim tragedy of the inn.

AMIEL—A chauffeur.

CHAPTER I.

THE CALL TO DUTY.

country tavern had been noised abroad far and near among motoring people.

Everybody of note in New York, yes, even in Philadelphia also, knew of the novel feasts that could be enjoyed here; consequently, hardly a day passed but that a goodly company sat with their feet under the groaning tables of mine host.

Usually M'siu Anton saw these cars of the rich roll up to his door with a smile of pleasure on his rubicund face.

It was different today!

His fat knees actually trembled under him until he had made sure that neither of the twain who had gotten out of the motor-car wore the dreaded uniform of the police.

But why should the older one of the tourists glance

The swinging sign of the famous road-house was creaking in the early morning air as M'siu Anton, the proprietor, opened the door hastily, and stepped out on the porch.

His usually florid face was a mottled white, while plain, unadulterated terror shone in his glowing eyes.

A touring car had just swung in from the well traveled road, and come to a stop.

Many pulled up before the entrance of the *Black Cat* every day, though it is true seldom at such an unholy hour in the morning.

The fame of the excellent dinners spread—at this

up at the swinging sign, above which sat the big black wooden cat from which the road-house took its unique name, and then speak something to his companion?

It was singular, indeed, although at another time the proprietor might have considered it natural enough.

So M'siu stood there, waiting, yet still trembling.

He began to take hope, however, that perhaps after all things might not be so black as they had seemed.

His former inclination had been to wring his hands, and bemoan the cruel fate that had, during the night just passed, brought such a blight upon his house.

Now he sucked in a shred of new courage with the fresh morning air, and resolved to be as calm as his excitable French nature would permit.

The two gentlemen approached.

"Is this M'siu Anton?" asked the older one, politely.

The unhappy proprietor of the road-house indicated by a nod that such might be the case.

"I have eaten many times at the Café Marlin, when I believe, you were the *chef* there. Could we have breakfast; we are just out on a little tour?" continued the grave looking gentleman in the motorist garb.

At the same time he was observing with considerable interest the very evident traces of fear and alarm still visible on the other's twitching countenance.

"Yes, in a short time, gentlemen, it will be possible. But, pardon me, does either one of you happen to be a doctor?"

The two who wore the motor coats and goggles looked quickly toward each other at these anxious words from the tavern keeper.

Then they laughed softly.

"It's no use, Fergus," said the older one; "you can't deny the fact. I fancy you must *look* like a doctor, and bear the professional trade-mark stamped on your face."

"Well," grumbled the big man, "you win, all right. The first call it seems, is for me."

"Then you *are* a doctor, monsieur? I am very much relieved; though perhaps an undertaker would be more useful after all. But you can counsel me, give me advice, and I need both."

The two travelers pricked up their ears at this.

"H'm!" chuckled the heavier man, he who had admitted being a physician, "after all, my friend, you may find yourself in the same box as myself. But tell me, M'siu Anton, why do you say that either a doctor or an undertaker is needed in this place?"

"If so be he is not yet dead, a doctor may save him!"

"Perhaps."

"And if the worst has come, as I sadly fear, then surely some one will have to see about burying him!"

M'siu Anton shivered again as he spoke, and looked half fearfully over his shoulder toward the open door. But whether his alarm concerned the living or the dead, it were impossible at that stage in the game to say.

While the quiet looking physician, who seemed to be trying to hide his light under a bushel as he journeyed, was thus questioning the tavern keeper, his older companion's keen eyes searched the other's plump face for any tell-tale signs.

"It is a man of whom you speak?" asked the doctor.

"Surely, sir."

"A guest, or a member of your family?"

"A guest, and a very good paying one too. Many a dinner party has M. Van Alstine given at the *Black Cat*, to his rich friends. And they were ever a jolly company. Alas! that it should have come to pass here, under my very roof!"

"Do you happen to mean Mr. George Van Alstine?"

"Yes, m'siu, that is his name."

"The well known New York millionaire broker?"

"I regret to admit that it is so."

There was calamity in his very tones, an air of poignant mystery in his whole manner.

The two travelers exchanged significant glances, even while the doctor shrugged his shoulders, and sighed.

"You see, my friend, I was right. We are apparently both of us the recipients of a positive summons that will not be denied. The question is up to you to decide. Shall we stay, or go on?" he asked.

"We will stay!" replied the other, with the manner of an old war horse that sniffs the pungent smoke of burnt powder from afar.

At these words the proprietor of the country inn looked both relieved and anxious.

"Thank you, gentlemen. Will you be pleased to enter here?" he said, waving his fat hand toward the open door just behind.

And so they for the first time found themselves inside the walls of the *Black Cat*.

Naturally they looked around them.

The quaint furnishings of the place must attract attention even among old travelers.

And yet, after that one sweeping survey, it might be noticed that the older man ceased to regard these things as of any moment.

He was evidently more accustomed to studying human beings than inanimate objects.

"One moment, please M. Anton, before you take us to see your guest. Do you really believe that a doctor can do him any good?"

His compelling eyes forced those of the innkeeper to meet them; and just as he expected there came the half reluctant admission:

"I fear that it is too late, sir."

"Why should you say so—you have a reason?"

"Because I myself touched his hands, and oh! they were as cold as ice, and then the blood!"

"Which would indicate that the gentleman is dead, and has been so for some hours. Still, under the circumstances it is the duty of a physician to see if anything can be done. Lead us to the room, please."

To himself he was saying:

"This man knows *something* that he does not wish to tell. He is much more distracted by a dreadful suspicion or certainty in connection with this tragedy than the awful happening itself. And if this be so then is my little vacation rudely cut short on the very threshold, for the call of duty is imperative, and I cannot refuse to accept the gage thrown down when a dark mystery confronts us."

He fell in behind the doctor as they ascended the narrow stairs of the country inn.

Wheezing, as if short of breath, the portly landlord led the way.

He even gripped the bannister alongside the stairs, as if he had been suddenly overtaken with a spell of weakness.

And yet it was only yesterday that M. Anton had been heard to boast that he was in full possession of all his strength and other faculties.

Which would seem to prove that there may be happenings calculated to sap the energies of the strongest man in less than an hour.

Arrived at the top of the stairs they found themselves in a square hall, from which a number of doors opened off.

Still breathing heavily the innkeeper looked back as if to see that his two companions were near by.

His face had once more assumed that mottled appearance, and in his eyes shone fear!

And the doctor's friend also noticed that his first glance was toward a certain door that was closed; although when he started to move forward it was in an altogether different direction.

From which he judged that there might be some one on the other side of that closed door, concerning whom M. Anton must be deeply anxious!

Why?

"Enter, gentlemen!" said the landlord, softly opening another door.

And so the two travelers entered the chamber of death!

CHAPTER II.

THE MAN ON THE FLOOR.

Upon entering that room the actions of the two travelers was quite unlike.

While the physician, filled with professional zeal, made straight for the ghastly figure that lay upon the floor close to a large easy chair, and besides an overturned table and lamp, the other immediately stepped over to a window, and threw up the shade.

The daylight chased the shadows into the corners, and rendered it an easy task to see around.

"This man has been dead some hours!" announced the doctor, instantly, falling on his knees, the better to examine the body.

At that the landlord staggered and braced himself, while the breath came through his lips in a sigh not unlike a whistle.

"I feared as much, gentlemen, though I know so little about medicine and such things. Poor M. Van Alstine, to think that he should have come to such a sad end as this," he murmured.

There was at least no sham about these words of deepest regret.

"He is genuinely sorry for what has happened, that's clear; though he may feel disposed to cloud the issue on account of a desire to shield *some one* whom he fears must have caused the death of this gentleman."

So the doctor's companion was saying to himself, as he curiously watched the play of emotion upon the features of this well known *chef*.

Then he too walked silently forward, and bent down to see what his friend was doing.

"Utterly useless to attempt anything like resuscitation. The summons came to George Van Alstine, I should think, some four hours ago," said Dr. Fergus, shaking his head.

"At three-thirty three," remarked the other, quietly. Turning his head the physician saw that he held something in his hand.

"His watch?" he asked.

"Yes, it fell from his pocket when he tumbled over,

and stopped at that very second, from the concussion. I think you will find, if you examine the timepiece, that some of the jewels are broken."

"Good. We have therefore the exact time that the assassin struck the fatal blow!" remarked the physician, a little above a whisper, and for a distinct purpose.

He knew that the landlord was standing near by, with both eyes and ears strained to see and hear all that passed.

Just as he had anticipated M. Anton gave a whimper, as might a dog that feels the lash.

"Oh! gentlemen, is it possible that my poor house shelters not only a sudden death, but that a tragedy has entered here?" he moaned, wringing his hands.

The doctor looked up at him keenly.

"Why, any one should be able to see that this poor gentleman came to his end by violence, and undoubtedly at the hands of some enemy. It is as clear a case of murder as I ever saw in all my practice!" he said.

"*Mon Dieu!* I shall be undone!"

"Why do you say that, landlord? What have you in connection with the sudden death of this rich broker?"

The other took the alarm instantly.

"Surely nothing, only that it has happened in my house," he said, quickly, and apprehensively.

"True."

"And that he was my guest, my patron, whose loss I must deeply deplore."

"Yes, we can well understand that. When did he come here this time?" asked the older traveler, taking up the cross questioning of the landlord at this juncture.

"Last evening just at supper time, sir."

"With a party?"

"Alone."

"Had he ever come to you, without friends, before?" The landlord thought for a moment before replying.

"I believe not, sir."

"Ah! yes, how did he come?"

"In his car."

"With a chauffeur, of course?"

"Oh! yes, sir."

"And with the intention of staying all night?"

"So he said when he arrived. That he was tired of the noise of the city; that he did not sleep well, and believed the quiet and restfulness of the country would be a relief to him."

"Did he say anything else, landlord?"

"Why, yes, sir, now that you mention it, he said that he expected some one to call and see him while here."

"H'm! that may be a very important fact in unraveling this terrible mystery. Do you know whether he expected this party to arrive in the night or to-day?"

"He did not say, sir; but that he would put up with me for several days, if all went well. It might easily be that the party he expected *did* come in the night, and—" the completion of his suggestion lay in an expressive shrug of the French shoulders, and a hasty shivering look at the huddled form on the floor.

"Evidently the wish is father to the thought with this man. Such a consummation would relieve him with regard to the haunting fear that is even now causing him to shrink. It would free from suspicion some one whom he knows!"

Such was the conclusion of the man whose business in life was to read people like so many books.

The cover never deceived him; what lay between was the part worth while.

"Up to the time you retired there was no one arrived to see Mr. Van Alstine, was there, landlord?" he continued.

"No, sir, but we do not lock our doors out here, you understand, and any one might have crept in during the night," answered the other, eagerly.

"That is only a hazard, a guess on your part—you do not know that such a thing occurred, I presume?"

"Oh! no, sir. I know nothing save that when I said good night a little before eleven, to this poor gentleman he seemed just as usual; and when I discovered him lying here but a short time ago, in a pool of blood, I was horror stricken."

"And terror stricken, I presume you might add—" and then as the other cringed and looked at him in sudden fear the gentleman continued: "for surely it was enough to strike the bravest man with alarm to make such a ghastly discovery. I do not blame you M. Anton, for being unnerved."

The doctor was listening to what was passing.

He seemed to feel that his companion knew how to take this matter in hand much better than himself, and was satisfied to play second fiddle.

"Did you have other guests last night?" continued the man with the keen eyes.

"No, sir, only one who has been here with us for a long time, and seldom leaves his room."

"Still, you should tell us who he is. In a matter of this sort you know that even small facts are essential. When a detective comes out here from the city he will insist on knowing *everything!*"

Just as he expected at the mention of that word the proprietor of the road house quivered like a bowl full of jelly.

"Yes, sir, I suppose so, sir. This party is a son of my wife's named Rudolph Berthold. He is sick, and while I do not particularly fancy his disposition she insists that he have a home with us until either his health improves or—" and again that shrug told of the other ending of the case.

"Under the circumstances I imagine then that you would hardly give him one of the best rooms in your house, if he is a non-paying guest—for instance any of the other three on this floor?"

This was said purposely to draw out the information concerning that particular room toward which the landlord had shot that look of dread as he reached the top of the stairs.

"Certainly not. He has a small room back, sir," came the immediate response.

"Reached, I presume, by that narrow passage which I saw leading out from the square hall here?"

"Yes, sir, although it is also connected with the lower floor by another stairs."

Apparently the questioner had gained the information he sought; which was to the effect that it would be an easy matter for anyone to *come direct* from the same little rear room on to that landing where the guest chambers opened!

That might prove to be an important fact ere the termination of the trail were reached.

"You say you have no other guests, landlord. Now be kind enough to tell we who the members of your family are?" the gentleman continued.

"Besides Madam, the wife, there is just Marie; save the man in the stables, and the woman who comes every day to do the rough work."

"But who goes home at night?"

"It is so, sir."

"And who is Marie?"

"My niece, sir," with an effort to control his feelings; "whose father was an American army man, an officer. Her name is Marie Stanhope."

"I imagine then that her parents are dead, since she is living with you?"

"That is correct, sir. Marie will come into a snug little sum when she is of age presently."

"I notice that the doors are numbered on this landing, and that we are now in Three. What of the others—do you and your wife occupy one?"

"Yes, sir, one of those opposite. The other is empty just at present."

"And Marie?"

"Has the room next to this, number One!"

That was the very door toward which the landlord had shot his look of concern when arriving at the top of the stairs!

CHAPTER III.

AN IRON FIRE DOG.

Upon entering the room of death the companion of the doctor—who it may as well be known now as at any other time, was a very famous detective himself—had closed the door softly behind him.

He did not wish to disturb the house by the sound of their conversation.

"When you discovered this terrible thing in here, landlord, why did you go downstairs instead of shouting out and arousing the house?"

The other scratched his head as if to reflect.

"I think, sir, I had a notion that some one ought to go for a doctor immediately, and that I was intending finding the poor gentleman's chauffeur and sending him off in the car," he replied.

"Oh! then the chauffeur is still here; he did not return to the city last night?"

"Why, certainly not, sir. Mr. Van Alstine would need him in going about the country."

"And where does this party sleep, may I ask?"

"Over the stables there are two rooms. My man occupies one, and the driver of the car had the other."

"Do you know the name of the chauffeur?"

"Yes, it is Amiel. He has been with M. Van Alstine a long time, I understood."

"And you have not seen him this morning?"

"No, sir. I only came out of the door when you arrived. To tell the truth I saw your car approaching, and it was partly that which caused me to hurry out."

"Still, you may have thought of something besides, calculated to prompt you to refrain from arousing the house?"

"It was my wife. She is excitable, you see. Once before, when something happened here, a wounded man brought in from the road where his horse had thrown him, she alarmed me by her hysterics. I remembered, and that was one reason I kept still. Besides, I must say I was so overcome with fright that I could hardly be held accountable for my actions."

"Doctor, what would you say was the immediate cause of the gentleman's death?"

"He was struck on the head with a heavy missile,

and I do not believe uttered even so much as a groan from that instant," replied the other, promptly.

"And the instrument that was used?"

The man on his knees held up a piece of metal about a foot long.

It had stains of blood upon one end!

"Here is undoubtedly what caused his death. I have been examining it, and as near as I can make out it is the base of an iron dog, used on a hearth to lay wood upon!"

"Yes, yes, you are right!" exclaimed the landlord, as his horrified eyes fell upon the missile.

"You recognize it then?"

"I do. It became broken last Spring, and I laid it aside, intending to have it mended when the first tramp plumber came along."

"Was the gentleman standing or sitting when the blow came upon him, doctor?"

"I believe he had just jumped to his feet. I base my deduction from the fact of his lying as he does; and also the evident truth that he was struck, not from behind, but plainly on the side of the head."

"In other words, he must have just leaped from his chair upon hearing some sound, and was turning his head to discover who had entered, when the end came!"

"That is my positive opinion, Jim."

"Well, the point I'm trying to get at is this. If he were standing erect and fell in a heap as we now see him, his dropping must have been accompanied by more or less of noise."

"I should say so, certainly."

"Landlord, did you hear any such sound last night, or rather this morning between three and four?"

"I do not remember hearing any fall, sir."

"Did you hear *anything* that might be construed as such a sound?"

"No, sir."

Although he uttered the words with what seemed to be a straightforward manner, there was that about the appearance of M. Anton to create further suspicion in the mind of his inquisitor.

"He did hear something in spite of his denial. Or if not that, he *saw* something that makes him afraid. What is he keeping back, and why? Is it Marie? How could a mere girl have anything to do with this terrible crime? And yet, have I not known of such things? Jealousy, passion, both of them have caused girls to take the desire for revenge into their own hands. We shall see."

Again he turned upon the landlord.

"My friend here will tell you that I am a lawyer, and always deeply interested in mysteries such as this. You are in trouble, M. Anton, and I shall make it my business to assist you, without expecting any fee for so doing. Are you agreeable?" he asked.

"A lawyer!" muttered the other, doubtfully; and then his face brightened up.

If there was nothing to pay why surely a lawyer might prove of very great value to him just then.

"Yes, sir, if you choose to put it that way. I am in great distress of mind, as you can see. This thing is bound to gain unenviably notoriety for my poor house. Not only have I lost a valuable patron, but ruin may stare me in the face. Yes, I surely need advice."

"Very well. Then let us close the door of this chamber and go downstairs. There I shall ask to see

and converse with the members of your household, as well as the chauffeur outside."

"As you will, sir. I am in your hands," replied the other, with a resigned air.

The detective removed the key from the lock, and made sure to fasten the door after him.

At the same time, out of the corner of his eyes he was observing the landlord; and again he saw him cast an apprehensive glance toward the door of the room which he had admitted sheltered his niece, Marie.

"Evidently," mused the detective, as he followed the other to the top of the stairs. "I shall experience considerable interest in meeting this same Marie. Ah!"

His last little mental exclamation was caused by seeing the door of Room One opened and a head thrust out.

Marie must have been up, and heard some of their movements in the adjoining apartment.

Perhaps her curiosity had been aroused when she knew several men were leaving, and she had opened her own door to ascertain who they could be.

Either that or else her actions were governed by a motive more personal.

"Whew!"

The detective could not help thus giving vent to his astonishment when he saw that the face was that of a most remarkable handsome girl.

"Marie is a beauty, surely. That fact is evident at a glance. I wonder now, could the fact of her presence here have anything to do with George Van Alstine's determination to try the country air as a remedy for insomnia. I believe he was considered quite a Don Juan in his younger days, and a bachelor to the end."

Here was food for thought.

The field was immeasurably broad, and as yet the trails to be found were decidedly faint.

Down below in the quaint old taproom, with its remarkable decorations, the stout landlord seemed to recover a small portion of his nerve.

He wiped his face frequently with a white handkerchief, as though mental strain caused him to perspire freely.

"By the way, M. Anton, you have not told us how it was you happened to discover this—er, tragedy. Did you hear any sound beyond the door of Mr. Van Alstine's room, or is it your habit to personally awaken your guests?"

"Neither, sir. The door was partly open, as I noticed when I left my own room," came the immediate response.

"Indeed, that is an important fact, now. Partly open, as though some one may have come out in a hurry, and did not wait to fully close it?"

The landlord simply made a sound that might be a sigh or a groan, as one chose to take it.

"And as you passed you looked in, very naturally—is that it, landlord?"

"I supposed that he had gone downstairs for some purpose. As he had never stayed over night before I did not know his habits. Yes, I looked in as I passed."

"And then you saw—"

"Something on the floor. At first I thought it might only be some of his clothes, but then a horrible suspicion swept over me."

"Yes?"

"And I was impelled to turn back and look again!"

"This time you saw more?"

"I saw his face, and—the blood! I entered, fearfully. I even stooped down to feel one of his hands. It was like ice, and frightened me still more."

His voice was husky with emotion, while his eyes continually roved about, and his hands kept rubbing over each other in nervous dread.

"Then you hurried downstairs?"

"I considered a minute what to do. My first impulse was to shout out; but I remembered Annette."

"That is your wife, I take it?"

"My wife, yes. I was afraid to alarm her. Then came the desire to see a doctor. I thought of Amiel, and that I could start him off for one. So I crept down the stairs more like a thief than the proprietor of the inn. As I opened the door I saw you coming, sirs."

The detective had not mentioned the fact, but he knew some one had just come down those same stairs, and was even then entering the tap room. As he anticipated, it was Marie!

CHAPTER IV.

AN UNEXPECTED DEVELOPMENT.

The girl was even more of a beauty than the detective had supposed.

He looked in vain for any evidence in her face that would indicate the possession of a tragic knowledge of the terrible event of the night.

Feminine curiosity he saw there, just as was natural, and she doubtless wondered who these early guests of her uncle might be, and why they had come out of the room given over to Mr. Van Alstine.

"Not guilty!" muttered the doctor in his ear.

"Oho! so you have also guessed where the landlord's fears lay? I was wondering whether those sharp eyes of yours had noticed certain things. But you must not be so hasty in jumping at conclusions, Fergus. You know very well you would never be guilty of doing so in diagnosing a medical case, however innocent things might appear to the naked eye. Wait and see. Perhaps she may have some interesting information to give us, at any rate," was what the other answered back.

M. Anton had waddled over to his niece, and was apparently talking to her in a low voice.

Her face had suddenly gone white, and into her black eyes came a look of horror; so it was apparent that he must have divulged the fact of the broker's death, although he may have said nothing about it being more than that.

Slowly she followed him across the room. She looked at the two strangers more closely now, as though a new interest had been awakened in them.

"This is my niece, Marie, gentlemen," remarked the landlord. "You said you wished to ask her some questions. Answer them, Marie."

The detective was more confirmed than ever in his conviction that this fair maid could never have struck the terrible blow by which Van Alstine had apparently come to his death.

He only went about the task of questioning her from a sense of duty; besides, as he had whispered to his fellow traveler, there was always a chance of learning something of importance, which they could not afford to miss.

"You have heard from your uncle, Miss Marie, that a terrible thing has happened in your house last

night?" he said, trying to speak calmly so as to give her assurance.

"Yes, sir, and what he told me has shocked me very much," she replied, her voice quavering a bit.

"You knew Mr. Van Alstine then?"

"Oh! yes, sir. I have met him several times."

"And you always found him an agreeable gentleman?"

"Yes, sir. I had heard considerable about him from a friend of mine, even before I ever saw him; and I wanted to have him know me."

She cast a quick glance toward her uncle as she unconsciously allowed her voice to fall when saying this last.

The detective remembered the words afterwards; at the time he thought it might have been simply a girlish desire to attract the attention of a very rich bachelor, who might make an indulgent husband, if he could be snared in the net of matrimony.

"Your apartment adjoins that of Mr. Van Alstine, does it not?"

"Yes, sir," with a start, and a wondering look at him in which indignation and horror were mingled.

"I ask because I thought that perhaps you might have heard some sort of falling sound in there during the night," he went on.

"I do not know whether it was in there or not, sir, but I did hear what seemed to be something falling."

"Ah! yes, have you any idea what time that could have been, Marie?"

"No, sir, but it was while that storm was breaking over the house."

"I remember that we did have a little squall some time last night; yes, it must have been toward morning. There were a couple of pretty loud crashes of thunder, and some lightning, but very little rain. Why do you say that it must have been about this time you thought you heard something fall?"

"I was awakened, and sat up suddenly in my bed. The first heavy crash of thunder had aroused me, and yet I seemed to be conscious of the fact that *something* in the house had been knocked down."

"Yes; go on, please."

"I was so deeply impressed with this idea that I even got up, and throwing on a wrapper went out in the hall to see if there was anything wrong."

"But you found nothing?"

"I stood at the top of the stairs and listened, not brave enough to go down; but I heard nothing, and once more returned to my own room. The storm did not last, and I was soon asleep again."

The detective smiled.

He knew now why the fat innkeeper had shivered when he looked toward the door of Marie's room.

Undoubtedly M. Anton had seen the girl as she left the hall, and a dreadful suspicion had since seized upon his heart that she must have been the guilty one.

Poor old silly thing, to think that a creature so timid as this pretty girl could ever dream of taking a human life.

But then there was no need of explaining these things to the landlord just yet; time enough to relieve him of his carking care when the case had advanced a little further along.

"Tell me, Marie, when you were in the hall did you happen to notice whether the door of Number Three were open or shut?"

She turned a bit red with maidenly confusion, and then answered directly.

"It was ajar, sir. I saw it swinging slightly in the draught; but not knowing whether the gentleman had left it that way on purpose, for ventilation, of course I did not think of closing it. I only hoped it would not bang again."

"I see. Evidently the thought occurred to you that the sound you had heard may have been his door slamming shut, only to open again. Is that it?"

"Yes, sir. For I remembered that the catch of that door never worked properly, and unless the key were turned in the lock it was apt to swing."

"Thank you for the information. As a lawyer, you know, striving to protect the interests of your good uncle, I wish to learn all the facts I can. M. Anton has empowered me with authority to ask questions of all his household and I am beginning with you. By the way, did you see Mr. Van Alstine when he retired last night, and was he in his customary good humor?"

To his surprise the girl gave immediate evidence of confusion.

She glanced again at her uncle, who was talking earnestly with Doctor Fergus.

"I did not see him then, sir; I could not say," she replied, not without an effort.

"Meaning that you yourself had retired?"

His keen eyes held hers in a sort of thrall; she seemed to feel that she must reply, and just as he wanted her to.

"No, it was not that. To tell you the honest truth, though I hope you will not mention it to uncle, I was not in the house at the time, sir."

"Visiting a neighbor, possibly?" but he knew that it was not so, for her face betrayed the fact.

"No, sir. It was Bob's night to come and see me. He does not like to have uncle see him, because, well, I am sorry to say Uncle Jules has taken an unreasonable dislike to Bob, and refuses to let him enter the house."

She spoke with a bit of fire, and it was evident that for all Uncle Jules might say or do, this maid was going to have her Bob, whether or no he could woo her in the conventional way.

So the detective smiled.

"I see. The old story over again. When did the course of true love ever run smooth? And so Mr. Bob persists in coming to see you periodically, does he? And it happened that last night was the time appointed. By the way, where does he live?"

"Oh! in New York City. You see he is a reporter there on a newspaper."

"Um, yes, and comes away out here of an evening just to see you? Bob deserves great credit. But still, he knows when he has found something worth while."

She blushed under his glance.

"Please do not tell uncle, unless it is absolutely necessary, for he always gets into one of his angry moods. He is so unreasonable about Bob. I do not dare mention his name. Even aunt is against me there. But it will not be long now before I am of age."

"Oh! I suppose they both fear that some adventurer will be after you, because of your good looks, and the little dot that I hear will come to you. But you slipped in after Mr. Van Alstine had retired, you said?"

"Yes, sir. Through the back way as usual," with a roguish twinkle in her sloe-black eyes.

"Do you know what time that was, Marie?"

"The clock just struck eleven as I entered, sir."

"And Bob went back to the city to drudge again on his daily task. Is Bob a steady young man, or could he be said to be a bit wild? I only ask because often the newspaper fellows lead a pretty rapid life?"

But he really wanted to know more about Bob.

"I'm sorry you asked me that, sir," she replied.

"Why so?"

"Because Bob used to be somewhat wild; but he's really and truly changed, now that he knows me; but his uncle wouldn't believe him."

"His uncle—you haven't mentioned him before?"

"Oh! I forgot to tell you that it was because of Bob I wanted to get in the good graces of Mr. Van Alstine; for you see, he was my Bob's uncle!"

CHAPTER V.

THE FAITH OF PRETTY MARIE.

Jim Crawley, the detective, could hardly keep from giving an exclamation when the artless girl sprung this stunning fact upon him.

The murdered man was Bob's uncle.

And the said Bob had been prowling around the *Black Cat* on the preceding night!

There might not be anything to the coincidence, but all the same it behooved him to immediately get busy, and pay some little attention to Bob.

He knew that her bright eyes were fastened upon his face; and accustomed to guarding its secrets he betrayed no more of his feelings than would a sphinx.

"So Bob was a nephew to Mr. Van Alstine, was he? Since the broker was a bachelor perhaps Bob may have expected to be remembered in his will some time?"

He put the question quietly, yet much depended on the answer Marie might give. She evidently saw nothing of the sly trap. To her Bob was as true and honest as the day, and there was nothing to conceal.

"Why, yes, that was the trouble. Once Mr. Van Alstine told Bob he had him down for a nice slice in his will. Then he kept threatening that he would cut him off unless he turned over a new leaf, and settled down."

"Which was all right in the gentleman. If he himself had led what might be called a fast life, he knew it was wrong, and meant to keep his favorite nephew from going the same pace. You could not find any fault with him for trying to reform your Bob, could you?"

"But you see, he wanted him to marry a girl!"

"I suppose so, if he was to settle down."

"Some other girl, the daughter of a woman he used to be in love with himself long ago!"

"Oh! that alters the case. Of course you objected to that, as well as Bob?"

"And that was why I wanted to have Mr. Van Alstine know me, and like me. Perhaps then he would forgive the poor boy if we were married, and asked him to let us both care for him. And now it's all off, and he's gone!"

The tears came into her eyes as she spoke, as if in some fashion she had been trying to like the elderly stock broker—for Bob's sake.

Jim Crawley was possessed of an uneasy suspicion.

He really hoped that it might never amount to anything.

But what if Bob, rendered desperate by reason of some recent threat on the part of his uncle, had sought

his room with the intention of putting it out of Mr. Van Alstine's power to alter his already made will?

It was hard to believe that any young man could contemplate such a vile deed; and yet the lure of money is responsible for many strange and next to impossible happenings in this world of ours.

And besides, the detective did not have the honor of Bob's acquaintance, so how was he able to judge of his capacity for good or evil?

But he made up his mind that it would not be long before he should seek out the young gentleman, who must give a strict account of all his movements after the time he left the company of Marie on the previous night.

"Kindly tell me his full name," he went on.

She looked up at him with a slight frown, as though possibly she considered that he was showing an unreasonably pertinent interest in her lover.

"Why, Robert Anneston. His mother was a sister of Mr. Van Alstine's, you see."

"Well, I must ask you not to tell any one about these things, concerning which I've been making inquiries."

"You are puzzling me dreadfully, sir. Why should my uncle keep wringing his hands every little while? Suppose a gentleman has died in our house—Oh! it can't be possible—all that you have said, and the questions you have asked—what does it mean? Did Mr. Van Alstine—tell me—did he commit suicide?"

Unconsciously she caught his arm as she put this question, and her black eyes shone with sudden comprehension.

"No, I can say positively that he did not," replied the detective, at once.

"Then it is even worse than that. I can see it all now—the sound of something falling, the partly open door, uncle's strange distress. *He was killed, perhaps murdered, and you suspect me!*"

Her voice had risen as she spoke. She no longer remained within her guard. The others ceased conversing. They had their eyes fastened upon Marie, and the man with whom she had been so confidentially talking.

"Not so, my dear child. Nobody could suspect that you would know anything of so terrible an affair. But I believe it right to tell you that it is true the guest under your uncle's room did meet with a violent end, at that very time you got up to see what had fallen; and we are investigating in the hope of penetrating the dreadful mystery concerning his death."

"Then you think it was Bob—I know you do, for I can see it in your face!" she cried, quickly.

"Bob!" echoed the landlord, in a new panic.

"Yes, because he was out here to see me last night," and the girl turned defiantly on her uncle.

"But why Bob?" asked the doctor, seeking light.

"Because Mr. Van Alstine was his uncle. I never even told that to Uncle Jules, you see, and he is hearing it now for the first time," she went on, recklessly, defiantly.

"His uncle—Mr. Van Alstine his uncle, and he a good-for-nothing young rascal whom I had forbidden the house? Perhaps—" and a sudden glow spread over the face of the inn-keeper, telling of the inspiration that had seized upon him.

He began to suspect that indeed it must have been no other than Bob who had crept into the house bent on a desperate mission.

Crawley was through with the girl now. He believed that he knew everything she could tell him, and was anxious to see some of the other inmates of this strange house on the country road, where death had visited between two days.

"Will you allow Marie to go about her ordinary duties, M. Anton. And bring your wife down here, please," he said.

"My wife! Surely she can know nothing about this awful calamity, sir. I will swear that she was asleep the whole night. Not even the shaking of the house by that first growl of the thunder aroused her," protested the landlord.

The detective answered with a shrug.

"Nevertheless, I wish to make her acquaintance. It is essential that I meet every soul who was under this roof last night. After I have talked with her a few minutes I shall ask you to take me to the room of that sick man—Rudolph Barthold, did you say his name was?"

The landlord started and looked searchingly at him.

He seemed to have been seized with yet another idea, and while his face might signify uneasiness, yet it was not wholly without a gleam of savage satisfaction.

"He dislikes this son of his wife so heartily that if it should be proven that he had done this terrible deed through love of gain or any other motive, mine host might not grieve so very much. It would at least relieve him from an incubus."

So the detective was musing while the landlord once more climbed the stairs to bring his wife down.

Now, one of the first things which Crawley had done while he was examining the body in Room Three had been to investigate the condition of the pockets.

Mr. Van Alstine had apparently not even taken off his clothes with the intention of going to bed; but must have sat reading until he became sleepy, when he blew out the lamp and settled down in that easy chair.

He was completely dressed at the time death overtook him.

And from the roll of bills in his pocket, besides more or less loose change, it would not seem that any one bent on loot had done the evil deed; unless indeed, something may have frightened the assassin away before he could profit by his work.

More likely would it appear to be a mission that hinged on revenge, or some similar motive.

He awaited the coming of Annette.

The girl had passed into another room, evidently one used for meals, for he could hear dishes rattling, as though she were unusually nervous after her recent peculiar experience.

Not that she doubted Bob at all, but then there were those who would; and to be suspected of murdering his uncle must always prove a terrible thing for a young man to bear.

Presently she came out again, and walked straight over to the detective.

In her eyes he saw the steady look of confidence.

"Here," she said, pressing a paper in his hand.

"What is it?" he asked, interested of course.

"It is his address in the city, the paper upon which he is employed. He goes on duty at twelve in the night. You will find that he was there from that time on; and you told me this happened between three and four!"

He saw her intention.

She would prove an alibi for her lover!

"Thank you, Marie. Master Bob is indeed a fortunate young man to have inspired such confidence in his reformation. I hope he is deserving of your great faith. I thank you again. Later on I may satisfy myself on this score."

The girl turned on her heel abruptly, looking white but resolute.

Crawley knew that one reason for her hasty departure lay in the fact that the innkeeper had entered the room again, and just back of him came a middle-aged woman who was possibly his wife, Annette.

CHAPTER VI.

THE TELL-TALE DROPS OF BLOOD.

One look was quite enough to inform the detective that M. Anton must have told his wife what had happened under the sheltering roof of the *Black Cat* during the night just passed.

Alarm was written big on her face.

She immediately fastened her eyes upon the quiet gentleman, whom some intuition must have told her was doing the investigating.

The innkeeper led her forward.

"This is my wife, Annette, gentlemen all. Just as I assured you, she knows absolutely nothing concerning what has happened. Ask her!" said the landlord.

Nevertheless, he was looking more peaked than ever, as though he may have found a new source for worry.

And the woman—Crawley saw something in her face that indicated a knowledge beyond what she intended to have appear there.

Could it be that the man had told her of seeing Marie in the hall at the very time of the crash of thunder by which the house was shaken—the moment when the terrible assassin struck the fatal blow?

She did not cast one glance toward Marie, as would have been natural under such circumstances; and accordingly he made up his mind that this could not be so.

What then?

Annette had fears concerning something, *somebody*, of that he felt sure.

Was it of herself?

Then the detective remembered.

She had a son in the house, a man who did not get on well with his stepfather. That son's room lay to the rear: but a narrow passage allowed of his arriving in the square upper hall with ease.

Could the terrible thought have assailed her that Amiel had been tempted to rob the wealthy broker; and that finding himself in danger of being discovered when the other sprang to his feet, awakened by the burst of thunder, he had struck him with that very heavy iron dog?

It seemed possible; indeed, more than that, it seemed probable.

She was looking right at him as he addressed her, trying to maintain her composure, though with an effort that was painful.

"Madam, I only wish to ask you a few questions, which I trust you will endeavor to answer directly, as it is in the interest of your husband that I am trying to learn the truth concerning this sad occurrence."

"Yes, sir," she said, licking her dry lips as though it was only with the utmost difficulty she spoke at all. He pitied her, she looked so ready to collapse, and his opinion was strengthened; for he knew that such

a woman as Annette would tremble more because her son were threatened with discovery than if it were herself.

"She is a little deaf, particularly in the right ear. Please speak louder, sir," observed the innkeeper.

"Ah! then that might account for her not hearing the sounds last night, when at least two bursts of thunder from all accounts, shook the house," suggested Crawley.

M. Anton nodded eagerly.

"It is as I said; she never moved through it all," he cried doggedly; "and she can tell you nothing, absolutely nothing."

"But you have informed her about the tragedy, I see?"

"Certainly, sir. Otherwise she would have declined to come down here to see you. But you will find that it is time wasted to ask her questions. She knows nothing whatever."

There was only one thing that Crawley would have liked to learn from Annette, and that he knew she would guard sacredly, yes, with her very life if need be.

Why should she fear that her sick son might have been tempted to rob the rich guest?

Crawley was more anxious than ever to meet this Amiel, and size him up.

He put a few questions to the woman, and just as her husband had declared she was densely ignorant concerning anything that had passed since retiring on the preceding night.

Nor could the keen-eyed detective discover anything in her manner to indicate that she was playing a part in thus professing ignorance.

He found her an unprofitable witness, save in that one little particular—that she hugged fears of her own to her heart, which must assuredly have some connection with her son.

"That is all, Madam. I am satisfied that you can know nothing that would assist me," he said, finally.

The look of positive pleasure that flashed over her face was confirmation, strong as proof of hold writ, in Crawley's practiced mind that his suspicion held true.

Not wishing to alarm her, lest she take some means for putting Amiel on his guard, the detective waited until she had passed into the other room to see about getting breakfast.

Voices in that quarter announced that the work woman must have arrived, and was engaged under Marie in preparing the food.

Then he beckoned to mine host.

M. Anton had kept one uneasy eye on the gentlemen as he hustled about his bar.

When he saw that finger upraised and crooked he immediately dropped the napkin with which he was polishing a glass, and approached.

"What more can I do for you, sir? We have a telephone here, with which the town can be reached, if so be you think it right to notify the county physician: for I suppose he must be called in?" he said, humbly.

"Not just yet. There is one other whom I would like to meet first," remarked the detective, calmly.

The landlord started and looked quickly at him.

"You must mean—Rudolph!" he said.

"Since he is the last of your household, and the only one who was under this roof last night, whom I have

not yet had the pleasure of meeting, it is obvious that he is the party. Take me to him. If a sick man, he should not be required to leave his chamber."

"Oh! you mistake, sir. Rudolph is not so badly off as that. Indeed, between you and myself as friends I have more than once suspected he was quite as well as the next one; and that he only wanted a nice snug refuge where he could loaf, and take life easy——"

"Yes, until what?"

The landlord looked a trifle confused.

"Until perhaps the storm rolled by," he said, hastily.

"H'm! that might mean many things. For instance one could imagine you inferred that Rudolph was something of a black sheep, and had given his fond mother much trouble and anxiety?"

"He has," replied the other, almost fiercely; "she tells me little about him, but I have eyes, and I know! He was over in Paris for three years, and I more than suspect that he had connection with the Apaches who have mocked the efforts of the police to scorn."

"Plainly, then, you yourself do not place much confidence in Rudolph's honesty."

A shrug of the shoulders followed, that might stand for almost anything.

"Oh! sir, I keep everything of value under lock and key, since he came. And I am determined that the day of his departure is close at hand," whispered the landlord, keeping one eye on the connecting door, as though afraid lest Annette hear what he threatened.

"Well, you have interested me very much in Rudolph. We must make his acquaintance without delay, eh, Doctor?"

The physician had been standing near all this time, listening to what was said, but making no remark.

He seemed to know that the case was in good hands, now that Jim Crawley had halted his little vacation to investigate this strange tragedy of the road house; and that if his services were wanted they would be called for.

"I think it would be worth while, Jim," he now said, with a meaning look.

"I could bring him down here," suggested M. Anton.

"It might be better that we go to him, and along the narrow passage above. I wish to observe as I go," said the detective, steadily.

"As you will monsieur. Please follow me."

The fat landlord sighed as he spoke.

It might be the weight of the mystery was still pressing heavily on his mind.

Then again possibly he merely dreaded another climb of the stairs, which must have been more or less of an undertaking to one of his avoirdupois.

As they were leaving the taproom the detective, hearing a rustle of feminine garments, cast a quick glance over his shoulder.

Just as he had anticipated the landlord's wife had come to the connecting door, and was looking after them with an expression akin to horror on her face.

She guessed what their mission was, for she wrung her hands in silent grief.

"Still, she will not dare attempt to climb the back stairs and put him on his guard. That would make his guilt all the more apparent. I am afraid that Rudolph has been a bad son," thought the detective.

They were now upstairs again.

Only glancing toward the closed door of the room of tragedy the landlord led the way into the narrow hall by means of which the rear could be gained.

Crawley struck a match and stooped down to examine the floor.

No sooner had he done so than he uttered a little exclamation of satisfaction; *for his eyes had fallen upon several drops of dried blood on the uncovered boards!*

CHAPTER VII.

BAITING RUDOLPH.

The crackling sound of the match, as also its sudden flare, caused the landlord to halt.

Looking back he saw the detective on his knees examining something on the floor.

At a word from Crawley, Doctor Fergus also bent down to scrutinize the several small marks.

"There can be no question about it," he said positively and with conviction.

"These are blood spots, dried on the wood!" declared the detective.

"Yes."

"The person who left them behind was passing along this narrow hall!"

"Unquestionably, Jim."

"But look through this little magnifier, Doc. Do you not see something singular about them?"

The other bent still lower as he took the small glass offered him.

Then he shook his head.

"What is it?" he asked, always willing to learn at the feet of this celebrated student of criminalogy.

"Notice that in each case there is a tiny but marked difference at one end of each spot. If a person were hurrying along with a cut hand the drops of blood on the ground would all be thus marked, and it is very easy to tell which direction the party came from."

"I see, and in this case——"

"It would appear that the one responsible for these drops of blood must have been *heading toward the square hall at the time they fell!*"

"And also according to my analysis these marks are more than a few hours old! I should say that they had been made at least a day or more back!" the physician declared.

The two men, still stooping, looked at one another, as though this new complication baffled their immediate comprehension.

Then suddenly the wrinkles were all smoothed out as if by magic.

"Gentlemen," said the voice of the landlord, marked a little by his wheezing and puffing; "perhaps I might be able to throw light on those marks, since I alone am responsible for their being there!"

Crawley arose to his feet, smiling.

"Thank you, M. Anton, for coming to my relief. And now, if you please, tell us just what happened that you should be hastening along here, shedding your blood in this fashion," he said.

The other held up his left hand.

For the first time they noticed that he had a strip of adhesive plaster upon one of his fingers.

Crawley and Doctor Fergus exchanged looks, and even smiled at the ease with which what had seemed to be a very serious bit of evidence against Amiel had been brushed aside.

"It was yesterday morning that it happened," began the innkeeper.

"Twenty-four hours—well, I was not so far out of the way," murmured the physician, as if pleased that his diagnosis had proven so near the truth.

"I was doing a little work back here when the tool I handled slipped, and gave me a nasty gouge. Once upon a time I was something of a carpenter. That was before I turned *chef* and made a name for myself at the Café Marlin. So it seems that I am clumsy. Children and old fools should beware of edged tools, they say."

"Well, you cut yourself?" remarked Crawley, desirous of bringing the other to facts; and at the same time he was listening to make sure there was not the rustle of skirts on the back stairway.

"And naturally enough my first thought was to hasten to the bathroom to let the water run and cleanse the wound. So, holding my hand and thinking to catch all the blood I came along this way, for the bathroom is just beyond you—that door you see, gentlemen."

The detective pushed open the door.

"Here is another of the telltale spots, Jim," observed the doctor, as he entered the wash room.

"Which would seem to prove the story of our friend beyond a shadow of a doubt. Well, that clears one damaging bit of evidence away. I was beginning to believe Rudolph must be a very clumsy operator, after all. Now we must mentally beg his pardon. M. Anton, lead us on, please."

Once more they followed the passage.

In a few seconds they reached a door.

"Knock!" said Crawley, as the landlord made signs to the effect that they had arrived.

Immediately there was heard the sound of footsteps, and then the door opened.

The light was not very good in the passage, but what the detective saw of the man's face that was projected from the doorway did not favorably impress him.

It seemed to be shifty about the eyes, and to one of his experience the word "criminal" was plainly labeled in his every feature.

Rudolph stared hard at them; he also frowned as though he may have suspected that his stepfather was about to execute some long standing threat about having him evicted from his comfortable lodgings.

"Rudolph, these gentlemen want to talk with you. Something terrible has happened under this roof last night, and you would do well to answer all their questions. This gentleman is a doctor, and the other a lawyer. I am here only because they requested me to show them up to your room."

While the landlord talked Crawley had pushed closer, in order to see the face of the unwelcome lodger better.

Annette's son certainly bore an evil stamp on his sinister countenance; he might not be guilty of the death of George Van Alstine; but all the same Crawley felt sure that if his past were exposed to the light of day crimes just as revolting would be unearthed in which he had a share.

He stared at the two strangers; then laughed in a hard, reckless way.

"I thought at first you were coming to kick me out, generous stepfather. Since it is only information the gentlemen want, they're welcome to any that I happen to possess. It's lucky they didn't come after the spuds, for they'd find me dead broke, as usual. Walk into my

little parlor, gents, as the spider said to the fly; and excuse the confusion, for the old woman hasn't had a chance to climb up here yet and clean things."

Accordingly the three of them passed in, the landlord itching to hear all that was said.

While Crawley was acquainted with many of the criminals of the great metropolis, he could not remember having met Rudolph before.

But then M. Anton had said something about his having been three years in Paris, so that doubtless most of his activities may have taken place over the water.

"Did you know the gentleman named George Van Alstine?" asked the detective, suddenly.

Taken off his guard apparently, Rudolph started, and his face betrayed alarm.

"No, I never did," he replied, hastily.

"Yet you started when I mentioned his name?"

"That was because I'd heard it, you see. I knew a cove that took some liberties with the things in the city house of Van Alstine," grinned Rudolph.

"Indeed. Then apparently you did not know that Mr. Van Alstine was a guest at this house last night?"

The man looked into Crawley's eyes.

"Yes, I knew that. The old woman told me when she fetched my supper up. I was havin' one of my bad turns and couldn't go downstairs, you see. But what has the fact that Mr. Van Alstine chose to stop over here to do with your coming up and breakin' in on me?"

"Oh! nothing much, only we thought you might want to hear what had happened," remarked the detective.

"What's this? Some clever crook got his paws on a fat wad of the broker's long green, eh? Well, I want to tell you that if you think I had a hand in the job you're barking up the wrong tree. I'm on the toboggan slide just now, and none of that for me."

He coughed as if to emphasize his remark; but still it is an easy thing to manufacture such a bark, and Crawley thought too much credence ought not be given to his remark about being in a bad way, physically.

The doctor might know, only he was not saying anything just then, leaving the talking to his comrade in exile.

"It's worse than that, my man. Mr. Van Alstine lies dead in this house!" observed Crawley, solemnly.

"Whew! you don't say? And he can't take a bit of the brass along with him, can he? Well, we'll all go over the same road sooner or later. Say, you act like there was something sudden and queer about his takin' off?"

"There was, he met a violent death."

"Look here, do you mean he was killed?"

"Struck down in the night with an iron dog, and his skull broken!"

Rudolph was no longer the smiling, indifferent man; his face suddenly took on a scared look, such as might overwhelm a trapped criminal when the electric chair loomed up before his vision.

"That would mean murder!" he ejaculated.

"Nothing more, on the face of it."

"And you think I did it, do you?" he snarled.

"Oh! don't jump at conclusions so hastily. No one has accused you of the crime—as yet! We are simply assisting M. Anton in the matter. Since the tragedy has occurred in his road house it is only natural he

should be greatly concerned, and anxious to learn who could have struck that deadly blow," said Crawley.

"I know what it means; it's a set-up job to get rid of me, and that old skinflint Anton's at the bottom of it. But I'll fix him, all right!" and as he shouted these angry words the unwelcome lodger suddenly snatched a revolver from off the old bureau!

CHAPTER VIII.

DID HE SPEAK THE TRUTH?

Prompt action was needed to avert a second tragedy. Fortunately the detective was close enough to the reckless man to make a quick movement of his hand upward.

His fingers closed about the other's wrist with a clutch of steel; indeed, so fiercely did he press the bone and flesh that Rudolph dropped the weapon to the floor.

At the same time he gave utterance to an involuntary cry of pain and rage.

His eyes flew to the face of Crawley as if in that second he knew by some subtle intuition that this could be no common man who had held him up.

The detective threw his hand from him.

"None of that, my man," he said, in a low but tense tone; "you played the fool that time, and ought to thank me for saving you trouble. It is better to die in your bed, Rudolph, than in the electric chair!"

The baffled scoundrel stared hard at him.

He could not meet the look of those calm, steady eyes that seemed to pierce into his very heart.

"Aw!" he growled. "who are you, and what d'ye want with me?"

"You heard what I said before. Mr. Van Alstine has met with a sudden and suspicious death. You were in this house last night. We would like to understand if you happen to know anything about the sad affair. That is all, Rudolph."

The man swallowed hard.

"Go on. I know you want to ask me questions. I'm ready enough to answer, because I don't know anything about this thing, not me," he said, sullenly.

"Still, a man with the reputation you carried over across the water might be looked upon with suspicion, in a case of this sort."

This time the other shuddered plainly; it was as though the random shot of the keen detective had hit the bull's-eye.

He had a raw wound that hurt when touched.

"Say, what do you know about my doings over there?" he demanded, gritting his teeth to keep from allowing his voice to quiver.

"Never mind. All I am saying now is that a man with a reputation like yours has reason to feel anxious when found under a roof where there has apparently been committed an atrocious crime. Did you hear the thunder last night, Rudolph?"

"Sure I did. It nearly shook me out of my bed once," came the prompt answer.

"There were two separate shocks, I am told; now, was this the first or the second that jarred the house so much?"

"Must have been the first, because I heard another while I was sittin' up."

"Sitting up! What made you do that?"

Rudolph drew a long breath, frowned, and then grinned.

"I reckon I must a had the nightmare after that rarebit the old woman fixed me for my supper. You see I was dreamin' at the time that crash came. I kinder felt some seven-headed devil reachin' for my throat; and he just seemed to be gettin' hold of me when it came."

"Oh! I see. A mighty unpleasant awakening it must have been. You really thought you were in the toils, did you? Sure it was a dream demon and not the clutch of the hangman's noose?"

"Aw! let up on that, will yuh? I found myself settin' up in bed and shiverin' to beat the band. The whole house was ashakin' like it'd tumble in."

"Since every one who heard that shock seems of the same opinion I am forced to believe that the thunder crash must have shook things up quite lively around here. It awoke you, at any rate; and now, Rudolph, listen, for the next question I want to ask you is of the utmost importance."

"Fire away!" retorted the other, still watching Jim Crawley closely, as if he suspected that this clever stranger were endeavoring to trip him up, and have him commit himself by an incautious reply.

"As you awakened and felt the house trembling under the shock of that thunder crash, can you remember hearing anything else, a sound of any sort? Think well before you reply, man."

"I reckon I did."

"What impression did it make on you; in other words, if you thought anything at all about the matter, what line of reasoning did your conclusions follow?"

"D'ye mean what did I think that second sound was?"

"Exactly. I'm glad to see you catch my meaning."

"I jest made up my mind 'twas a door slamming shut," replied the other, carelessly.

"But you didn't get out of bed—you didn't wander from this room here to investigate, did you?"

The fellow laughed harshly.

"Why should I, Mister? Them things don't go to bother me none. The old woman knows her business. This is *her* house"—with a defiant glare at the landlord—"and it's a part of her duty, not mine, to see after bangin' doors at night."

"What did you do then?"

"Reached out and took a swig to brace my nerves; cause after that shake I needed it some."

He pointed to a black flask that lay on a little stand close to the head of a cot.

"And then?"

"Rolled over and went to sleep again, boss. Never knowed anything more till mornin'! Ain't used to gettin' up so early, but I keep hearin' voices around, and somehow I just felt that there was somethin' goin' on out of the regular way. I was right, if what youse says is true."

"Rather. Now look here, Rudolph."

"I'm listenin'."

"Unless this mystery is cleared up another way it's likely that you are going to get into trouble. That's what comes of having a bad reputation, you see."

"D'ye mean that they'll arrest me for this job I never done?" demanded the other, fiercely.

"It may be possible. One thing I want to warn you against my man."

"Oh! yes, you do, eh? Well, what is it, boss?" he sneered, incredulously.

"Don't try to vamose the ranch whatever you do!"

"Hey?"

"I mean just what I say. Don't dream of seeking safety in flight."

The fellow looked a trifle confused, as though possibly he may have been seriously considering that way of cutting the Gordian knot.

"Because," continued the detective, gravely, "no matter how innocent you may be, such a move will make it look as though you were guilty! *It may send you to the chair for a dead certainty!*"

"Huh! I ain't got so much time left here that I can afford to gamble with that little. I reckon I'll stick her out," grumbled the other, morosely.

Crawley had seen that his friend the eminent doctor, had been closely observing the man who was in hiding.

That was just what he wanted.

He depended upon those sharp professional eyes of Doctor Fergus at times to aid him in his labor of investigation.

Rudolph was an unprofitable witness.

If he knew more than he had ventured to tell, nothing apparently would induce him to narrate it.

Of course, there were other ways by which his story could be substantiated or proved false.

Crawley often preferred to trust to dumb witnesses in such matters, rather than rely on the word of a man he knew to be vicious by nature.

He made a move as if to depart.

"That all?" demanded Rudolph, with what seemed to be a sigh of relief.

"For the present, yes. Take my advice and stay right here in your own little room until this ugly business has been settled. It will pay you, Rudolph."

"Looky here, was you just joshing me when you mentioned them Paris matters, or has yuh got word?" asked the other, uneasily.

Crawley only smiled mysteriously as he said:

"If so be you prove to have had no hand in this tragedy. I don't mind saying that I'm not bothering myself about any other phase in your checkered career. But a run now will land you in the stone jug; and then all your past must be shown up. France might put in a claim for your body then, my man. Stay here."

"All right. Reckon I will, bo'. Tell the old woman I'd like somethin' to eat, respected step dad."

The disgusted landlord made no reply, only looked daggers at the impudent and unwelcome lodger under the roof of the *Black Cat*.

Then they withdrew, and stood presently in the little square hall.

"What do you think of him, Doc?" asked the detective.

"He's a scamp, if ever there was one. I imagine he's done his best to break his mother's heart."

"Oh! that's a dead sure thing. I wasn't wanting to know anything about that. Is he as sick as he says?"

The landlord pricked up his ears to listen.

"I wouldn't give him more than two months at the most. He's doomed, to a certainty," replied the doctor, positively.

"Sure of that, are you?"

"It may be far less time; certainly no more."

And then M. Anton sighed with relief, as if he saw speedy emancipation from the load he had been carrying so long.

CHAPTER IX.

LOOKING UP BOB ANNESTON.

"What did you pick up in that room, Doc?" asked the detective, with a smile.

"My handkerchief."

"But something else besides, I'm sure."

With a low laugh the other held up an object.

"Rudolph's gun, eh?"

"Why yes; after you caused him to drop it, he had so vicious a look on his evil face that I fancied it might be a good thing to relieve such a man from the possession of a deadly tool."

"Wise head, that of yours, Doc. Who knows what that clever little move may result in. Perhaps a human life might be saved," smiled Crawley.

"And now what next, Jim?"

"Will you wait for me downstairs a little time?"

"Certainly. But I presume we'll have to be letting the authorities know about this affair presently; or they may accuse us of wanting to hog the entire credit of the sensation."

"Yes, I'll use the 'phone presently, and get in touch with the county physician. Who is he, landlord?"

"A Doctor Webster, in Loraine, sir."

"Thanks. I won't be many minutes, Doc."

"Going in there again to see if you've overlooked any clues?"

The detective smiled mysteriously.

"Perhaps," he said, simply.

The other two went on down the stairs, the fat landlord with various sighs and grunts, for all this active work was hard on one of his ponderous size.

Crawley took out the key, and in another moment stood once more in the death chamber.

A little more light was streaming in through the window now, where the shade had been raised.

He stood there and looked.

The figure of George Van Alstine lay just where it had fallen; for Crawley knew too much to disturb it to any extent under such conditions.

In his fall the broker had knocked over the small table that had held the lamp.

This latter had its shade shivered into a million pieces.

Moreover some of the oil had seeped out and soaked the carpet for a foot around.

The lamp was out at the time this thing happened. That seems settled, for otherwise the house might have caught fire. Then how did the assassin see just how to bring that iron dog down on the side of his head? Had it been practiced a dozen times I doubt if a more fatal spot could have been found; for the skull just there is thin in comparison with further back."

He looked all around the room carefully, even getting down on hands and knees to examine the carpet, as if he had some hope and expectation of finding the imprint of a foot outlined in the bloody spots there.

"H'm! I don't wonder that Marie was startled, and that even Rudolph sat bolt upright in bed when all this racket took place. What with the fall of the man, the concussion of that murderous iron dog on the floor, the crash of the table, and the shivering of the lamp shade there must have been quite a conglomeration of sounds."

Crawley remained in that chamber of death not over five minutes.

In that time he had gone over the entire apartment as with a fine-tooth comb.

If he found anything new that pointed along another line of evidence one would never suspect it from his face at the time he emerged.

He looked as calm as ever; and Jim Crawley had the reputation of being a human sphinx among his kind.

Again he locked the door, and descended the stairs.

The landlord and Doctor Fergus were sitting there on the front porch, evidently conversing, and upon the one subject of engrossing interest.

"Where is your 'phone, Landlord?" asked the detective.

"Just at the other end of the room. You'll see a little cubbyhole there, with a door, sir. Open it up."

"Oh! a regular booth; that's fine," remarked the other, pleased to know that he might talk along the wire without every one hearing what he said.

"Give me connection with the '*Daily Wheeze*' in New York City," he said, as soon as he caught Central.

Presently a distant voice called:

"Hello! hello!"

"This the *Wheeze* office?"

"Yes."

"I want the editorial rooms."

"All right; you've got them."

"Have you a reporter on your staff named Robert Anneston?"

"Bob Anneston—yes, we have."

"Can I talk with him now?"

"I don't think so."

"But this is on business of very great importance."

"Sorry, but—"

"A question of life and death!"

"Wait. I was going to say I don't believe he's here just now."

"Do you mean he's left the *Wheeze*?"

"Oh! no. I meant that it's past his hour for being on duty, that's all. Bob's with us yet, all right."

"Perhaps then you could give me a little information concerning him."

"Don't think I could. Have to ask Mr. Warrington for that."

"Who's Mr. Warrington?"

"Our night editor."

"Where can I get in touch with him, then? I wouldn't be so persistent only that the matter is of the very greatest importance to Anneston; in fact, it concerns his whole future; for his uncle is dead!"

"Phew! I'm on. I know about that uncle, some. Wait a minute; hold the wire! I saw Mr. Warrington only five minutes ago. Something detained him here this morning when he should have been home long ago. I'll see if I can find him and put you on with him. His uncle, eh? Phew!"

"Thank you!"

But Crawley knew that he was wasting his breath, for the other had dropped the receiver and left the 'phone.

A minute passed.

Two slipped by.

Then he heard a scraping sound as if some one might be picking up the receiver again.

"Hello!"

It was a different voice now, and he hoped the newcomer might be the night editor.

"Is that Mr. Warrington?" he demanded.

"It is."

"I am making inquiries concerning one of your men, Mr. Warrington, a Bob Anneston."

"Yes."

"His uncle, Mr. George Van Alstine is dead."

"Yes."

"And I want to communicate with Bob at once, as it is of the utmost importance. Can you help me in that respect?"

"He isn't here just now."

"Can you give me his home address?"

"Um. Bob lives in a bachelor apartment uptown. Let me see, I think I have the address right here. Yes, it's called the Humbert, and is on One Hundred and—well, I can't make out my own writing; but his telephone in the building is 7776 Morningside."

"Thank you, Mr. Warrington. By the way what are his usual hours on duty, may I ask?"

"Twelve to four, though sometimes it is continued later than that if an emergency demands."

"Is he generally prompt in showing up for duty on time?"

"Yes, he is, although I don't see what the deuce this has to do with this matter."

"I assure you it has a great deal to do with it. Will you kindly tell me, sir, if Bob was on deck at midnight last night?"

There was a brief delay.

"Who is this talking to me?"

"My name, sir, is Jim Crawley!"

An explosive sound came over the wire.

"Gee! not the Jim Crawley, I hope, for Bob's sake?"

"Well, I can guess what you mean, Mr. Warrington, and will say for your benefit that it is true. Now will you kindly answer my question: I assure you that it is of vast importance that I know."

"What was it you were inquiring about, Mr. Crawley?" asked the subdued night editor.

"Was Bob Anneston late last night?"

"You mean in showing up for duty at twelve?"

"Exactly."

"He was not, Mr. Crawley."

"You are positive of that, are you?"

"I ought to be, for I swore enough to impress it on my mind conclusively."

"What's that, sir?"

"I say I was angry last night, because I had a particular assignment I wanted Bob to cover. When he failed to show up I had to send an inferior man."

The detective was thrilled by the answer; but his voice seemed as calm as ever when he went on.

"You are telling me, are you not, that Bob Anneston did not come to your office at all last night?"

"That is the bare truth; and I am anxious since it is you at the other end of the wire, Mr. Crawley. I am very fond of Bob, and I sincerely hope he hasn't been getting into any trouble."

"Oh! I guess not," and with that the detective rang off.

CHAPTER X.

THE MEETING BEHIND THE OLD BARN.

Standing a moment outside the telephone booth Crawley remained plunged in deep thought.

There was reason.

What he had learned from the night editor concerning the unexplained non-appearance of young Anneston on the preceding night made matters look more or less suspicious for Bob.

He had been over in Jersey courting Marie, for the girl had confessed that she was out of the house walking in his company at the time Van Alstine went up to his room, and so she did not see him depart.

Undoubtedly she must have confided to Bob the fact that his uncle was a lodger in the road house for that particular night.

What then?

Would Anneston profit if his uncle were suddenly removed from this world?

It seemed so, judging from what the detective had so far been able to learn.

Van Alstine had threatened to change his will and cut Bob off unless he consented to come to his way of thinking, and promise to not only reform his ways but agree to marry the girl the broker had picked out for him.

This Bob seriously objected to.

He was already deeply in love with Marie, and would naturally hesitate to give up so charming a girl—that is, if he were the kind of fellow Marie described.

But why did he not go back to the city when he left the society of his sweetheart?

What could influence him to continue hovering around the *Black Cat*, knowing as he did that his uncle was in one of the guest chambers?

The case seemed to be showing a tendency for new tragedies, and Bob Anneston must be influenced to give an account of his movements ever since he said goodnight to Marie.

From what Crawley could gather this must have been at eleven o'clock, for Marie had said as much.

Evidently Bob could have caught a train had he so wanted.

It looked as though he had made no effort to do so, but deliberately remained away from his work, something very unusual with him.

Why?

Had the unexpected presence of his uncle in the road house anything to do with it?

Did he suddenly realize that an opportunity had arisen whereby he might strike a blow calculated to forever put it out of Uncle George's power to cut him out of his will?

At any rate the detective refrained from calling up the county physician.

A little more time would not seriously matter, especially since he happened to personally know the Doctor Webster mentioned, and doubtless Fergus did too.

Truth to tell, the detective had seen Marie pass out of the house by a side door, and there was that in the manner of the young girl to arouse his interest in her actions.

She evidently did not wish to be seen, for discovering her uncle on the front porch she immediately darted back, hesitated a few seconds as if worried, and then slipped away by an avenue that was not covered by the range of M. Anton's vision.

"H'm! looks as if Marie was off to keep an appointment again! Perhaps she has had some sort of signal from Bob! I wonder if he is still lingering around."

The idea gave Crawley an inspiration.

He would see for himself the meeting between the two lovers, if it were at all possible.

No sooner had the thought appealed to him than he started to carry it out.

"Piping" was one of his long suits, and no tracker in the business could do the following act better.

Marie looked back several times as if afraid lest some one might be observing her; but she never had even the first glimpse of Jim Crawley, who on each occasion was crouching behind some friendly screen.

Taking advantage of every object that offered itself, the detective managed to even gain upon her.

When she slipped behind an old barn that belonged to a house that had once been burned, Crawley was close enough to hear the low exclamation of delight, and even catch the series of plain smacks that betrayed the fervor of the lover.

"At any rate the fellow plainly cares for the girl," he muttered. "I'm sorry for Marie, though, if it turns out that Bob has yielded to a terrible temptation, and tried to make sure of his future through such a horrible means."

He managed to peep around the corner.

It was of more or less importance to him that he see just what this young Anneston might be like.

If he had to sooner or later arrest the boy for so foul a crime as the wanton murder of his rich uncle, it was time he knew him.

He saw that Bob was holding the girl fiercely in his arms, and continuing to rain a shower of kisses on her pretty face.

"Looks like a fairly decent chap, all right; but then it's a mighty poor policy to go by appearances alone. I'll hearken a bit, and see if I can pick up points in that way. Marie is evidently anxious to tell him the news about his uncle. Now for it."

He fixed his gaze upon the face of Bob, who seemed to be just such a young fellow as may be seen by hundreds upon the streets of a big city—no better no worse.

Marie had finally managed to escape from his embrace.

"I wanted to tell you," she said, breathless from her struggles.

"Yes, you're just dying to know why I'm back here so soon after leaving you? The truth is dearest, I didn't go to New York at all, but have been here within two miles of this spot all the time!"

"Well, he's frank enough," muttered the listening detective; "but like enough a man who had been guilty of a murder as atrocious as this must arrange some cock-and-bull story to explain his absence from duty."

He continued to strain his ears, desirous of catching all that was said.

"No, I wasn't thinking so much of that, although it is strange, Bob. What happened to you?" she asked, as she looked up at him, suddenly.

Her face had gone white with the dreadful fear that had clutched at her heart.

He laughed, and the listening detective could not seem to catch anything devilish about that sound.

"Well, truth to tell I've had the strangest experience of my life since seeing you. By a remarkable accident I've got on the track of a clever gang of rascals whose exploits have been making Jersey people sit up and take notice for six months. I've learned secrets that are going to give me the biggest scoop the old *Wheeze* ever had. It means more money in my envelope, and a push up the ladder, girlie. That's why I couldn't resist the temptation to run back this way, and see you once more before striking for the city."

"He says it well," muttered Crawley; "as if he had rehearsed his part for an hour. Why not, since some three must have passed since that tragedy happened? Is he telling the truth, or can it be a lie made up on the spur of the moment to account for his presence? Is he here because that other frightful mission chained him?"

But the girl was talking again.

She still held him back, and was staring in his face.

While Crawley could not see her look he just *felt* that it must be one of terrible doubt struggling for supremacy with faith and reliance.

"Oh! Bob! I've something awful to tell you!" she at last burst out with.

"See here, I hope that brute of an uncle hasn't gone and struck you, after finding out that you continue to meet me in spite of his orders? If he has—"

"No, no, it isn't that at all. He didn't know you were here last night. It's about Mr. Van Alstine!"

Was that start assumed?

If so Bob must be something of an actor, for he appeared to be suddenly aroused.

"Uncle George—what about him, Marie? Has he been—look here, he didn't try to make love to you himself, did he?" demanded the other, impetuously.

"Pretty well said, Bob," whispered the listener chuckling; "and if that was all assumed you're a dandy all right."

"What nonsense," retorted the girl; "as if I would let any one say things to me. But Bob, he's dead!"

"What? Uncle George dead?"

She nodded her little head.

The young man stared at her, while Crawley had his keen eyes glued on his face, seeking some telltale expression when the other imagined he was not observed.

"Good Heavens! this is terrible! When did he die? But what am I saying, when I know he was all right last night. Tell me more about it, Marie! You've given me a shock, all right."

"He—he was killed!" she faltered.

"Killed! Do you mean he didn't die a natural death? Killed? Uncle George! This is awful! And just when I was feeling so good, too, over that other thing. Look here, dearest, you are as white as a ghost. What ails you? Why are you trembling so? Is it because of what has happened to my poor old uncle?"

Again Marie gave several quick nods, as though unable to find her voice, so great was her emotion.

He looked into her face.

"But why should you—no, no. I couldn't dream of such a thing, it is too absurd, and yet, your emotion—good Heavens I see now; you think that I may have done this terrible thing—that that is what kept me over here!"

CHAPTER XI.

MAKING PROGRESS.

"Well, all I can say about it is, that if that young fellow is guilty of this atrocious crime he's wasting his time on a newspaper, when the stage would offer him both glory and fortune," muttered the watching detective, admiringly.

Marie had hidden her face on the shoulder of Bob; she seemed to be shaking with sobs.

"He was your uncle, Bob," she managed to exclaim.

"Sure, and a good one up to the time he wanted me to marry that old girl, the daughter of his friend."

"And he said he was going to cut you off?" she went on.

"Perhaps he did, but if everything turns out as I hope after this night's work, that isn't going to cut much figure in my calculations, girlie."

"But he was killed in our house; and you were somewhere near by! Oh! Bob, there is a terrible man at the *Black Cat*, asking all manner of questions. He says he is a lawyer, but somehow I fear it is more than that, and it will prove that he is—"

"A detective you mean? All right, let him ask questions if he wants. The more the better. If my poor old uncle has met with a tragic end the sooner the truth is found out the better. And I'll be the first one to push the investigation on. Now tell me about it."

"Oh! I can't hardly bear to speak of it, Bob. They said he was found dead in his room, and with his poor head broken by a blow from an iron dog."

"A what?" demanded Bob, interrupting her trembling explanation.

"An iron dog, part of the heavy andirons which were once used in that room your uncle occupied. This one was broken, and my uncle had put it aside intending to have it mended before we needed it again in the fall. Now you understand?" she replied.

"Oh! yes, I know what you mean now. You tell me that the cowardly murderer used that weapon to strike down my poor uncle? It must have been some enemy of his, for I suppose he had made many in past years. Was there any sign of a robbery, Marie?"

"They did not say so."

"Just as I said then: some one who has cause to hate Uncle George must have done it. I'm going to go to the house and demand that this thing be investigated to the limit."

"Oh! Bob!"

"Well, what now?"

"Don't you see it must all come out?" she whimpered, still clinging to him.

"About my being here last night? Well, let it! I'm tired of all this concealment anyway, Marie, as I told you the last time we saw each other. What if it does blow up before you are of age? Let them take your little dot away. I think I've got it fixed so that we won't suffer when I claim you!"

Was that a boast?

Did he refer to the fact that he still hoped to find that he was mentioned in his uncle's will?

Or did Bob intend to imply that this wonderful discovery he had made, with its possible great "scoop" for his paper, would increase his income?

"But that man asked me questions. Oh! I am sure he will believe that you know something about your uncle's terrible taking-off. Couldn't you go away?"

"Me? What for? That would be an acknowledgment of guilty alarm. I couldn't afford to take such chances. No matter what comes out of it I'm going to face the music. Don't worry about me, dear. And if Anton chases you out remember that you promised to come straight to me. I've got a little nest for you."

At this interesting juncture Crawley thought it best to show himself.

He wanted to have a little talk with Bob himself on the subject that interested him so keenly.

As he stepped forth he heard Marie give a faint shriek, and say:

"Oh! what did I tell you, Bob; there that terrible man is!"

Crawley knew that the eyes of the young reporter were immediately fixed upon him.

He returned the gaze with interest, and tried his best to ascertain if there was anything like alarm written on the other's face.

Anneston looked surprised, yes and annoyed; but if his heart was beating with a guilty fear he knew how to disguise the fact well.

So Crawley came up to the spot where the couple stood, the girl shrinking back, and Bob with one arm thrown protectingly about her waist.

"Fine!" thought the detective, with an inward chuckle, as he noted the defiant attitude of the cub reporter; "if one only could be sure that it were genuine!"

"Well, sir?" queried the other, and he stood his ground and Crawley reached a spot in front of the two lovers.

"I am speaking to Mr. Robert Anneston, I believe?"

"You know you are, sir."

"Of the *Daily Wheese*, New York City?"

"That's right, though I ain't sure they're proud of the connection, sir," replied the young man, shutting his lips tight together.

"And nephew of the unfortunate gentleman who ended his life in a tragic manner last night under the roof of the *Black Cat*?"

"You know all this, sir, without my answering you. Now, what in the dickens *do* you want?"

"I called up your office, and had a little chat with the night editor, Mr. Warrington, about you," continued the detective, suggestively.

Bob laughed shortly.

"Oh! yes, to be sure; you wanted to learn whether I had reported for duty at twelve last night. And of course he told you that I had failed to show up at all?"

"Exactly."

"Well, I would have told you the same thing. The explanation is plain, and now that this thing has come up I see there's no use trying to keep the truth concealed any longer."

He looked hastily at Marie, and some color came into her face on the instant.

"Oh! Bob, but you solemnly promised you wouldn't!" she exclaimed.

"Sure, but the circumstances have arisen that compel me to change my plans. When a fellow gets in a hole like this he can't choose his course. It's all bound to come out anyway," he said, moodily.

In spite of the words, however, Crawley did not think the other was referring to matters connected with the tragedy.

"Suppose you tell me what you mean, Robert?"

"You are a detective, I suppose?" demanded the young man, who, as a reporter had often come in contact with the sleuths of the regular force, and knew something of their ways.

Crawley laughed.

"Well, to tell the truth I am off on a vacation, and not supposed to be flying my flag; but a sudden call has thrown me in the path of duty again. Perhaps after all, the doctor is not the only one who bears the trade-mark of his calling on his face. But if I am what you insinuate all the more reason for you taking me

into your confidence, and telling me *everything*; for I'm sorry to say, Robert, that the circumstances look very suspicious!"

"I understand you, sir. But I was referring to the relations existing between this dear girl and myself," and he drew Marie still closer.

"H'm! plainly you think very much of each other; and I already understand that her uncle objects to your paying her attentions. But that should not feaze a young chap who has serious intentions."

"Well, it doesn't. You see," with a grin down into the face of the girl, "to tell the truth *she is already my wife!*"

"Oh! indeed! You wanted to make sure of her, did you? Well, it's an old story. And you meant to keep it secret a short time, eh?"

"Marie wanted it, because she'll be of age soon, and her little dot will come to her. Uncle Jules has even threatened to hold it up if she didn't quit meeting me!"

"Well, all this is very interesting; but it is only to be viewed now in connection with this tragedy. You are far from being a fool, Robert, and can understand that the first thing the coroner must investigate will be your actions?"

"Because I'm possibly down in the will for a slice of uncle's fortune? Yes, I see that. It gives me a bad feeling; but all the same I stayed over here for another purpose entirely. Uncle George's money could all go to found an orphan asylum before I'd think of lifting my hand to do him the least harm."

"Another purpose, you say?"

"Yes, sir."

"I heard you mention that to Marie here, and excuse me if I remark that it sounded very like a yarn manufactured for the occasion to cover up the truth."

Bob shook his head in indignation.

"Of course you would say that, sir; I suppose anybody must. But the proof of the pudding lies in the eating. If I could substantiate my words you would believe me then, I imagine?" he ventured, eagerly.

"Well, of course that would put quite another face on the matter. Have you any way of proving this remarkable story to be true, Robert?"

"You bet I have. I've got the whole thing written up."

"For your paper; but then I've known of fake sensations that would not wash!"

"But I'm ready to lead you to the den of these counterfeitors, sir, on just one condition," continued the reporter.

CHAPTER XII. STUMBLING ON A NEW COMBINATION.

Marie gave a faint cry of alarm at hearing what Bob said.

"Oh! and have you been in danger while I was sleeping? Bob, how could you?" she exclaimed.

"Why, it was all in the line of duty. A fellow on a lively, up-to-date paper has got to be a hustler from the word go, and keep his eyes peeled for sensations. One thing like this will make a man's reputation, and nearly double his salary. I knew that, and because I wanted that money the worst kind I took chances."

Bob seemed eager to reassure her that whatever he had done was in her service.

"You say you will lead me there if I wish?" asked Crawley, directly.

"Yes, as I said, on one condition."

"Name it."

"That you swear to let me have a certain length of time to get my story in to my paper ahead of giving any public information."

"That sounds fair enough. If you've made any such discovery as you say I expect you're entitled to all the honors. I make the promise cheerfully. I wouldn't bother with this matter, only you can see it has a bearing on the tragedy of the road house. I take you, Robert," said the detective.

"All right, Mr.—what shall I call you, sir?"

"Smythe will do just as well as any other name. Are you ready to lead me to this rendezvous of these desperate criminals at once?"

"It was my intention to get an officer or two and make the arrests; but only after exacting the same promise you have given me, Mr. Smythe."

"Is the gang a large one then?"

"There are some five or more connected with it."

Crawley looked at him closely.

"And you and I would only make two, all told. Don't you think that is a bit reckless, Robert? We'd like to gobble the entire bunch while we're about it," he said.

"But I happen to know, sir, that all but two of the gang have gone to Newark on business, and won't be back until evening."

"Ah! yes, that sounds better. We ought to be able to round up a couple. By the way, do you happen to be armed, young man?"

Marie trembled still more and caught Bob's arm.

"Oh! let some others do it, Bob, not you!" she cried, her pretty face wreathed in alarm.

"That would hardly answer, under the very peculiar circumstances governing matters just now," ventured the detective, smiling at her concern.

"You hear, Marie? I have made an assertion, and it is up to me to prove it. No, sir, I have no gun along with me. The game I came over here to bag needed nothing of that sort," he continued, laughingly.

"I happen to know of one that I can borrow," said Crawley, remembering how his friend the doctor had purloined the weapon belonging to Rudolph Bart-hold at the time of their visit to the sick man's room.

"All right, Mr. Smythe. Bring it here, and I'll wait for you."

Crawley left the pair there, still talking in low tones.

He did not much doubt but that he would find Bob on hand when he returned; and yet it was hard to reconcile himself to the belief in that very fishy yarn of the young reporter.

Still, it might be true.

Crawley knew that there was some secret gang flooding Northern Jersey with spurious notes, for the warning had gone forth some months back.

Several prominent Government sleuths from the Treasury Department in Washington, men with national reputations had been detailed on the case; but he had yet to hear of any success on their part.

If this cub reporter had indeed stumbled on a clue by mere good luck, it was bound to be a tremendous feather in his cap.

On the other hand he might be simply lying, for men of his calling are endowed with exceedingly fertile imaginations as a rule, and can manufacture a story out of whole cloth on the spur of the moment.

He found the doctor alone on the porch.

"Breakfast is ready, they tell me, Jim," was the salutation as the other came up.

"Well, it can wait for all of me. I've got an errand to do that will brooke no delay. Let me have that gun you picked up, please, Fergus."

"Why, certainly. Forget yours?" handing it over.

"Oh! no, but I want this for a young chap near by. We are going to arrest a gang of desperate counterfeitors—that is, if he hasn't lied outrageously to me."

"What's that you say? And I'm not going along to have a hand in the affair? Is that treating your old side partner right, Jim? Didn't we start out on this jaunt with the agreement that we would share equally all adventurers that might befall us? I'm disappointed in you."

"That's true enough, but see here, Fergus, some one has to stay here to take charge."

"What for?"

"To call the county physician, Doctor Webster in Loraine."

"I know him," grumbled Fergus.

"All the better, then. Besides, what if both of us went on what proved to be a wild goose chase, and failed to come back—all that we have learned would be lost. No, much as I'd like to have you along, old fellow, really your place is here."

"I suppose you know best, Jim; but I don't like it. Still, perhaps I can amuse myself investigating on my own account. Suppose you leave that key with me."

"You mean belonging to that room?"

"Certainly."

"You won't move anything around, Doc? You know too much for that!"

"I should. And I promise you that I'll displace nothing after I enter."

"First of all you'll tell the coroner?"

"After I've had my breakfast," returned the other, doggedly; "I'm not going to be done out of my meal by an influx of curiosity mongers; for as soon as I use the 'phone everybody will know about the tragedy, and the yellow sheets will send their reporters here by flocks. I haven't just cut my eye-teeth, Jim."

"I see you haven't, old fellow," chuckled the other, "here's the key. Take care of yourself."

The physician looked after his friend with kindling eyes.

"Think of his nerve in telling *me* to be careful when I only expect to interview a dead man; while he goes off to face a gang of desperate criminals with as cheerful alacrity as if it were a picnic. He certainly is the greatest dare-devil I ever knew."

Meanwhile Crawley headed toward the old barn again.

He anticipated seeing the lovers in the same spot, and upon turning the corner and failing to discover them he stood there, with an exclamation of impatience on his lips.

Had Robert deceived him then, after all?

Was the young man even now in full flight, alarmed because the finger of suspicion was pointing in his direction?

"Impossible! He could not be such a fool!" muttered the detective; "and yet where—"

"Here we are, Mr. Smythe. And I hope you've fetched along that gun," said a voice close by; and Robert stepped into view, with Marie clinging to his arm.

They had evidently considered it good policy to

conceal themselves lest some one come along the near-by road and discover his presence there.

"Here it is, Robert. I've examined it myself, and can guarantee that it is in prime condition. It happened to belong to Rudolph Barthold before we confiscated it as he tried to shoot his stepfather."

"Oh!" cried Marie, whom all these terrible things seemed to be affecting seriously.

Robert gently but firmly unwound her arms, and put her aside, kissing her once fervently as he did so.

"Come on, sir," he said, eagerly, as though anxious to get away before the girl created any scene.

But she only looked after him sadly, and seemed ready to whimper a little.

Crawley walked away at his side.

It really began to look as though Bob might have something worth while at his disposal; and the detective sincerely wished it were so.

Besides clearing Bob of any evil intentions by his remaining over in Jersey when duty called him across the North River, such an event might even bring about conditions that would add to the lustre of his own name.

"And to think that our vacation has just begun," mused Crawley a little bitterly as he walked along; "the very first morning out in our car brings us slap up against a case that demands our united attention. I believe that if I were marooned on the top of Mont Blanc something would happen, some rascal try to steal the snow cap of the famous peak, and I'd be detailed on the case."

Then he turned to his companion who was stalking along at his side, and remarked:

"Now, suppose you explain to me just how this odd circumstance came about. Do you know who is at the head of this gang you have discovered, Robert?"

"Why certainly I do. Who but Asa Trench, the most notorious counterfeiter of the day, and a man supposed by many to be in Europe," replied the other.

The detective elevated his eyebrows and whistled; and with reason, for he had found that name written on a slip of paper in the pocketbook of the man who lay dead in the guest chamber of the *Black Cat*!

CHAPTER XIII.

THE WIDOW'S COTTAGE AMONG THE PINES.

Asa Trench!

Crawley knew the name well enough, though he had never had anything to do with the owner of it, whose field of operations had been confined to the western country up to now.

Apparently he had come east, and lying low in this quiet Jersey district, had been pursuing his former nefarious calling with his usual signal success.

Asa Trench!

Crawley had thought the name sounded familiar when he had repeated it to himself upon finding that slip in the pocketbook of the dead broker.

But at the time he had never considered the notorious counterfeiter of that name.

Was there some connection between George Van Alstine and this scoundrel?

Of course it was absurd to think that the broker was in any way connected with the illegal operations of the man as a maker of coney money.

If the possession of his name marked a connecting link between them it must be in relation to some shady business that Trench had done for the broker.

George Van Alstine had the reputation of being a gay fellow, and possibly in the carrying out of one of his schemes he may have found the need of a reckless scamp, who for pay would do what he wished, and keep his mouth closed.

Was there some old unsettled account between them?

Could this Trench have learned of the presence of the broker in the vicinity on this particular night; and had he taken advantage of the opportunity to wipe out an old score that spelled blood?

Was Asa Trench the party whom the broker meant when he declared that he expected *some one* to drop in on him while at the *Black Cat*?

All of these things gave the detective much food for reflection.

At the same time he realized that he had other fish to fry.

Bob had not yet explained just how he chanced to stumble on the gang; which circumstance in itself must be looked upon as a most remarkable thing.

"Please continue, Robert. Tell me how you hit this trail. Were you a fox, and did they draw an anise seed bag across the path?" he asked.

"Well, it might look something like that. You see, I left Marie and was putting it for the station expecting to get a train at eleven twelve that would land me over in little old New York in good time. Well, just as luck would have it my shoe-lace came undone, and I dropped down to fasten it.

"It happened that I was in a dark spot, and while I fumbled, and swore at losing a precious minute, two men came along talking earnestly together.

"They didn't notice me stooping there, and when I caught what one was saying to the other, I quit trying to double loop that blessed lace, and froze right there, with my ears stretched out to listen.

"I can't tell you just what I had heard, but the name of Asa Trench was used and with a string of hard words attached that seemed to say the speaker had a grievance against the said party.

"Being a reporter, sir, you can understand that I've read much about that same Asa Trench during some months past.

"It flashed into my head that here I had accidentally run across a valuable clue, and that if I could only pipe those fellows to their destination I stood in line to make a discovery that would give me a dead cinch on a tremendous scoop, reward money, and promotion.

"Remembering Marie, and what need I had for all these things I instantly determined to go, though I regretted the fact that I was unarmed at the time."

"It was a daring piece of business, Robert," commented the detective at this juncture.

"Oh! I don't know, sir. You see I had no intention of letting them see me; and as I come from the West, and spent years on the plains I'm some on the track."

"I understand. Well how did it turn out?"

"Fine and dandy, sir. Couldn't be better, though it certainly took up more of my time than I expected."

"You followed them to their headquarters?"

"Yes, sir. It proved to be a quiet looking house off the road, and surrounded by a patch of pine trees. Not the haunted type of a place you read about such as book counterfeitors always select for their workshop; but just a modest little place that would never attract attention. In fact I had once asked about it, thinking

I might rent the same as my bird's-nest, and found that it was occupied by a widow lady and her sons, two young New York business men, who went to the city every day with their suitcases or bags, and in which they were supposed to bring out the family marketing."

"Splendid! Just what you'd expect from a man like Asa Trench. No wonder those Government sleuths have never been able to corner that fox. But please go on. I'm deeply interested, Robert."

By this time the detective was beginning to lose any suspicion he may have entertained regarding the honesty of Bob.

Accustomed to reading men like the pages of a printed book he felt positive that young Anneston could not have had anything to do with the mysterious death of his uncle.

"Well, I hunted around a long time before I found a way to get into that modest little establishment. You see a reporter is supposed to be equal to anything; but to tell the truth I wasn't used to burglarizing."

The detective chuckled.

Really, he was beginning to like this young fellow, Bob, and the more he saw of him the greater became his confidence that he could not be guilty, no matter what circumstances might indicate.

"But you finally did it, Robert, I'll wager you got in all right. Unless I'm grievously mistaken you're a fellow with a stubborn will, and who won't take no for an answer," he said.

"That's what Marie said, sir, when I asked her to be mine for life. You see she finally gave in to me. So did that cellar window. I had some matches along, and managed to creep to the steps leading up from below; and fortunately the door wasn't locked. So finally I found what I was looking for."

The detective patted him on the shoulder.

"I must give you credit for good work, Bob. Seeing what a clever rascal and old fox you were up against I don't think I could have done better than that myself. Then you've actually looked in on those scamps at work?"

"I certainly have, and for several hours I lay there as still as a mouse, listening to all they said, and observing every move. Why, I reckon I know mighty near enough of the business now to make me a dangerous customer to the U. S. Government if the notion ever struck me to go into that line," with a laugh.

"Which of course you'll never think of doing, Bob; for you're going to take good care of the sweet little wife who pins her faith on you. What were these handy boys doing all that time?"

"A dozen things. I picked out Asa right in the start, for he's the big mogul. I fancy he plays the widow racket, too, for he's a clean-shaven chap, somewhat feminine in his appearance. The others joked him now and then about something of the sort."

"You're surely right. I remember reading that it was a favorite game of his out in California some years back. He could fool the slickest of them at it. And his two darling boys who go so religiously to the city with their bags are really carrying stuff in and out. It's a great game, all right; and you're going to have the credit of the capture, Bob, I promise you."

"If we get him?"

"Don't you worry about that, we'll do the trick; that is, unless you've alarmed the old hawk in some way."

"I don't think so. I lay there until I was so cramped

I could hardly move. Then, as it was just before daylight I concluded to crawl out. Three of them had gone off with some of the stuff in their pockets to pass out among the Italians of Newark. So I waited till he went in another room, saying he wanted some sleep, and then crept out the same way I went in."

"You didn't leave any open window or other trace behind you, I hope?"

"Nary, Mr. Smythe. They coach us boys on the press too well for that."

"How about this room they used as a workshop—was it hidden in any way, so that any casual visitor would not discover it?"

"It was a secret little den that I calculate had been built by the man himself since going there. I don't even know now how to get to it; but can swear that it's in that house."

"This was just before dawn, you say?"

"Yes, in fact it was getting a little light when I finally crept away from the house."

"How was it you didn't post off to the city and get the ear of some Secret Service man?"

"I wasn't in a big hurry. I wanted the credit you see, and the promise of a scoop for my paper. So it wouldn't matter if a few hours went past. Besides—" and he turned his face toward the detective and laughed.

"Yes, I can understand. Marie was not far away, and the call of the heart wouldn't allow you to leave without seeing her again. Well, tell me when we come in sight of your widow's cottage, Bob," chuckled Crawley.

"That's right now, sir, for there it is down yonder—that little white house among the pine trees!"

CHAPTER XIV.

ROUGH HOUSE.

They had come perhaps a mile or more from the road house by this time.

At a cross roads Bob had turned aside, and headed away from the little village and station; so that as they stood on the knoll looking the detective judged that this cottage of the so-called widow was situated on the very outskirts of the place.

"I must say I admire the taste of our friend, Asa. He evidently knows a good thing when he sees it. And now that I have the lay of the land in my eye, let me arrange for our little surprise party," he remarked, pleasantly.

"If you will take care of the chief I think I could manage the other fellow," said Bob, resolutely.

"I presume Asa will be considered the more dangerous of the two; but what of this other? What manner of man is he?"

"A big enough fellow, but apt to be clumsy. If it comes to a rough and tumble believe me I can trip him up. The old habits still cling to me, and I was the best wrestler on the Double Y Ranch."

"All right; we'll consider that settled then. Now, as we come down the hill we'll just stroll into the door yard of that modest little place. I'll limp like a man who has sprained his ankle, and you hold me up. When the door is opened ask for a chance to have me sit down while you go for help."

"By Jove! you know how to plan it out, sir!"

"That will give me an opportunity to get inside, which is all I want. When you see me turn on the sympathetic widow do you look out for squalls, and

have your gun ready for the other chap, who may burst in on us like a whirlwind."

"Bully! Sounds like old times again. I'm just quivering with eagerness to start. Shall we be moving, Mr. Smythe?"

"Yes, but wait until you hitch up to me, for I've got to begin limping right now. How do we know but what a pair of sharp eyes may be fixed on us as we stand here."

"Wonderful. You cover the entire ground."

"It's necessary when you are playing up against such an old fox as Asa. The trouble is that too many men have counted him easy prey; and he slips out of the net. I hate to work such a game on him; but when a man is in this business he must put scruples aside. Asa has run up against me, and that fact is like a red flag thrown to a bull. Now, let us go."

Crawley began to limp most painfully.

He leaned heavily on the shoulder of his companion and every little while stopped to rub his ankle, as if it pained very much.

So they drew near the little white cottage lying so innocently among the trees.

Finally he pointed toward the half concealed house.

The two seemed to be talking earnestly, after which the younger man started forward, but was called back by his companion.

Then once more the painful journey was begun.

In this fashion they finally came to the gate, and turned in.

Every movement was most natural indeed.

If any one had been observing them from the windows of the cottage not a single false move would have been detected to have aroused suspicion.

Reaching the door Bob under directions, knocked.

His companion still clung to him as though in dire need of support.

"Some one coming!" hissed Crawley, in a fashion that thrilled his companion; "be natural, now, or the whole thing may be spoiled!"

So the young newspaper man braced himself, and strove to appear simply anxious about the condition of his groaning friend.

The door was opened, and there appeared a buxom woman, who looked at them in apparent perplexity.

"I beg your pardon," said Bob, "but my friend has sprained his ankle, and is suffering greatly. If I could leave him here for a brief time until a carriage might be obtained it would be a great favor. I hate to trouble you, madam, but really he is unable to walk."

Crawley groaned and sighed as if in tremendous pain.

So well did he carry out the part that any one might easily have been deceived.

"That's too bad," exclaimed the woman; "why, of course, you can leave him here while you run for a vehicle. Perhaps I might assist you in getting him inside to a comfortable chair."

Of course that was just what the artful detective had hoped would come about.

"If you would, please; he's been leaning on me all the while; but every time his foot touches the ground he groans," declared Bob, truthfully.

"It must be a bad sprain," said the widow, as she came forward and caught hold of Crawley's arm.

So they slowly advanced over the threshold and into the room.

Hardly had they gained the interior before the right arm of the detective swung upward and encircled the waist of the widow.

Possibly the average woman under such conditions would have screamed, or cried out in anger.

This one stood!

The disguised counterfeiter understood instantly how he had fallen into a clever trap; that touch meant to him the grip of the law!

He tried to spring back, and Asa Trench was said to have some of the agility, as well as strength, of the tiger in his make-up.

It did not avail him, for the arm around his waist was like a band of steel by now, crushing him tight, so that his powers of resistance were curtailed.

All he could do was to give a sudden shout that must undoubtedly be a signal of some sort.

"Look out!" called the detective.

Hardly had the words left his lips than through the door at the rear of the room a big human form came tumbling, with a roar like that of a lion.

This of course was the confederate.

Bob was ready for him, and scorning to use the weapon he had in his possession, he immediately closed with the impetuous one.

Around the room they whirled, upsetting tables, chairs and everything which had been the pride of the respectable widow of the white cottage among the pines.

It was a strange scene, and had any neighbor witnessed the same he must have fancied that the Welsh rarebit had disagreed with him, and this was but a distorted dream.

"The jig is up, Asa!" said the detective, as he wound his arms around the seeming widow.

Desperately the trapped counterfeiter struggled.

He had everything in the world to fight for, since a long term in the penitentiary confronted him; but the very toggery that had been his standby proved his ruin. He could not do himself justice while wearing those womanly garments.

When he felt the chill touch of a gun at his ear he ceased squirming, and became still; only by a suggestive shrug did he give evidence of his disgust.

Meanwhile Bob and the giant continued to flap around that room like a couple of wildcats in close quarters.

The young fellow made good his boast of being a clever wrestler, and despite his superior weight the confederate of Asa Trench was being rapidly reduced to a condition of impotence.

Gasping for breath he finally rolled over on the floor, and allowed his arms to drop.

"Fine for you, Robert! I enjoyed every second of that little circus, I assure you. Now to secure our game."

One glance around showed the detective what he wanted.

"Reach out and grip the heavy cord that holds the window curtain back. Wrap it around the wrists of your man, drawing his hands behind his back. If you've been on the range you'll sure know how to work it, Bob," he remarked.

"That's easy, Mr. Smythe," chuckled the other, as he turned his man over and set a knee in the small of his back, while he secured the said cord.

It took hardly a minute to accomplish the matter.

"Now, kindly get me a similar wrap, and I'll see to our friend here."

"I'd be obliged to you if I could make a quick change in my attire. It would be humiliating for me to appear in this garb before a court," said the prisoner, humbly.

"Oh! don't let that bother you, Asa. You make a fine appearance as a buxom widow. I'm only afraid that you may captivate some jailer, and effect your escape. You are too slippery a customer to take chances. There, if you've got your hands in, Bob, tie him for me, will you, and be sure it's good and strong. He's been known to escape more than once."

The widow indulged in another flow of strong language when the cord had done its work; and from the glitter in those cold blue eyes Crawley knew that if Asa Trench had half a chance he would not hesitate at any deed in order to gain his liberty.

The first thing the detective did was to shake hands with his new partner.

"A great story for you, my boy. Send it off as soon as you like. I want you to go to the village and get a vehicle, for we must lodge these gentlemen in a place of security without delay," he observed.

"All right, sir, and then I'll send my story in by a special messenger. I can add enough to it to make the thing complete. Shall I go now?" asked Bob, eagerly, for it was a great day for him and his fortunes.

"Just as soon as you brush up a bit. You look as if you had been sweeping the floor."

In five minutes the reporter was hurrying away.

Crawley took out a cigar and lighted it.

Asa Trench sat in a chair and stared at his cool captor as if trying to study him.

"Who the devil are you anyway? I thought I knew every man on the Secret Service force worth a rap; for I made it an object to watch them; but you're one on me. He called you Smythe, but I don't believe that's your name," he burst out.

"I am supposed to be a lawyer just now, off on a little vacation. Never mind what I happen to be at home. By the way, Asa, what do you know of George Van Alstine?"

The man in the widow's weeds looked at him more keenly than before.

"Now, what do you ask that question for? I insist on knowing before I answer a word."

"Oh! well, I suppose I shall have to oblige you. It happens that the broker came to the road house known as the *Black Cat* last night, intending to stay a few days, as he expected to meet *some one* there. During the night he met with violent death!"

The start that Asa gave might be assumed, but Crawley did not believe so.

"Thunder and Mars! and do you suspect that I had anything to do with it?" he ejaculated.

Crawley could have told him to the contrary, since he had really been under the eye of Bob Anneston from midnight until nearly dawn. He kept his own counsel, however, from motives of diplomacy.

"He was killed through a blow on the head. This was given by an iron dog—part of a broken pair of andirons. And in his pocketbook I found your name written on a slip of paper! You will be given a chance to explain how that happens to be there, Asa!"

The man was extremely agitated.

"I swear to you that I did not even dream Mr. Van Alstine was within ten miles of here. A year ago I

happened to meet him just by accident. He was in a little smashup on the road and I gave him some assistance. He asked for my card, but I had none. Just out of deviltry I told him my name. I suppose he wrote it down later, and kept it for reference. That's all, I give you my word."

"Have you seen him since?"

"Never."

"Didn't you ever hear from him? Were you the party he expected to call on him at the road house?"

"Of course not. I tell you I've had no communication with the man since that night a year ago. It was more of a joke than anything else that caused me to give him my real name. I thought of his consternation if he ever learned that he had been in touch with the notorious Asa Trench. And now, worse luck, that same prank may get me in a devil of a fix."

"Oh! well, don't you worry about it, Asa. You have a friend in that young man who has gone for a rig."

"A friend?"

"Because he's been watching you at work here since midnight, and as the broker was killed around four, your *alibi* is correct. Now let us chat about other things until he comes with the carriage. Sorry to break up your plant, but it's in the line of duty."

CHAPTER XV.

THE BROKER'S CHAUFFEUR.

In half hour the sound of wheels was heard.

Other vehicles had gone past from time to time; but this one drew up in front of the cottage.

Bob was driving, for he had thought best not to bring another party into the game just then.

Crawley had received a tip from Asa, who knew nothing was to be gained by further secrecy; and after Bob arrived to take charge, he found the secret door of the little workshop, and investigated the same.

It was with considerable satisfaction that he surveyed the appliances for the manufacture of bogus coin and bills, and realized that through his efforts the nefarious business had come to an end.

They bundled their two prisoners in the vehicle, Asa with the detective in the rear seat, and the big man alongside the driver.

Crawley had locked the cottage door.

It was his intention to be there again at night, with his doctor friend, and finish the capture of the gang.

They crossed the country to another town, so as to keep the matter as secret as possible.

Bob's paper would not come out until another morning so the story could not become public property until that time, at least.

Having lodged the prisoners in the town lockup, and impressed upon the officers the necessity for keeping a constant watch upon them, Crawley and Bob headed once more for the *Black Cat*.

Altogether an hour must have passed since they left the neighborhood of the road house.

Events moved swiftly when Jim Crawley took them in hand; and he was now once more ready to give his undivided attention to the mystery surrounding that tragedy of the upper room in M. Anton's caravansary.

He counted on the fingers of his left hand the various persons who might have been guilty of the crime, yet whom he had, from one reason or another, eliminated entirely.

There was the landlord himself for one; then his pretty niece; the woman Annette; Bob Anneston, nephew of the dead man; and now Asa Trench, whose name had been found on a slip of paper in the pocket-book of the broker.

There was left Amiel, the chauffeur; the man of all work about the place, whose name Crawley had not as yet even heard, and—Rudolph, the son of Annette.

Despite the fact that this last individual had seemed innocent on the face of things the detective was not yet wholly convinced of his having had no participation in the tragedy.

He was a thief by nature. He had played the part of an Apache over in Paris. That meant that he was ready to commit any sort of desperate crime for the sake of gain; that he believed the world owed him a living, and it was his duty as well as privilege to relieve those who had an abundance, of a part of their wealth.

True, nothing had apparently been stolen from the person of the dead man.

That was not conclusive evidence that robbery had no part in the affair. The man who had entered there may have only intended taking what loot he could lay hands on; and being disturbed in his work by the broker arousing he had struck with the first weapon his hands fell upon, and which happened to be the heavy iron dog.

Then, possibly horrified at what a terrible thing he had done, the man fled without daring to purloin a single article, lest it stamp the crime upon him.

A pretty theory, and one that had more than a few times proven to be a true explanation of just such a dark mystery, in the experience of this wonderful sleuth.

Would history repeat itself?

Had Rudolph, after hearing about the coming of the rich broker, been unable to resist the old temptation, and crept to the other's room by way of that narrow passage?

Finding the door unlocked had he entered and then the tragedy followed?

Crawley could picture the scene as the flash of vivid lightning accompanied the crash of thunder—he could even see the broker starting to his feet to discover an intruder in his room; then, before he could give voice to his alarm the heavy iron dog had fallen, to still his tongue forever!

And yet, as he thus conjured up the vision, the detective shook his head as though not wholly satisfied.

Of one thing he was sure—Annette feared the worse in connection with her wicked son.

She knew his weakness, and in her mother heart dreaded lest he had yielded again to the spirit that had lured him into many a serious scrape in former days, even before he went abroad.

Arriving at the road house Bob jumped out.

Crawley had declared that he wished to take the rig to the stables, as he desired to make the acquaintance of the man who worked there, also Amiel, the chauffeur of the dead broker.

"I'm afraid Marie's uncle will give me rather a cold reception," Bob said, laughingly.

"Never mind. You hunt up my friend, Doctor Fergus Holmes, and introduce yourself."

"He may look on me with suspicion."

"Not at all, for he knows that you went with me to try out this little matter. And you can be telling him

what we accomplished. He must be getting anxious by this time. I'll join you presently, and we'll have a bite to eat," remarked the detective, as he drove on.

When he drew up at the stables he found a man working at a splendid big car.

This he knew must be Amiel.

It was plain to be seen that the chauffeur had no suspicion that anything had happened to his employer during the night.

His appearance at least went far toward saying this; for he simply glanced curiously at the man who drove up, and then went on with his work of polishing up the already shining metal work of the big Alco car.

"Is the stableman about?" asked Crawley, wishing to hear him speak.

Amiel gave a sharp whistle which brought a man out in a hurry.

He was a stupid looking foreigner, perhaps of French extraction, since the landlord had a weakness for his own countrymen.

The detective wondered whether such a fellow would have the nerve to conceive a robbery, and upon being discovered, strike a blow such as had ended the life of George Van Alstine.

Anything is possible in the theory of a crime investigator; and he never allows himself to believe that ignorance stands for incapacity.

Nevertheless, of the two, Amiel interested him more.

The chauffeur was in a position to know whether Mr. Van Alstine usually carried any large sum of money with him.

Perhaps some great need had forced the man to think of stealing from his employer; and the sudden possibility of discovery had caused him instinctively to strike.

He may not have dreamed of murder, and only meant to stun the gentleman, so as to cover his escape.

"Take care of this rig for a short time," said the detective to the stableman, as he jumped to the ground; "You needn't remove the horse from the carriage, as I shall need him after a bit."

He slipped a coin into the rough hand of the man, who mumbled his thanks.

Turning on his heel Crawley naturally looked in admiration at the machine close by.

"That's a pretty good looker you have there, my friend," he remarked, in a sociable way.

Amiel looked up.

A chauffeur is usually proud of his charge, and his heart can be readily reached through flattery.

"We think so, sir. It's the regular stock car, just the same as won the Vanderbilt Cup twice. Mr. Van Alstine wants to make a change to another model of the same car; but I shall hate to give up this one," was what the driver said, as he started to rubbing again.

"You think he would sell this one, then?"

"I've heard him say so several times. Unless he's changed his mind since yesterday I rather think he might."

"Still, you don't know positively?"

"I wouldn't like to quote a price, but all the same I believe it could be bought, sir."

"Would you mind asking for me?"

"Certainly not, sir."

"I mean right away."

The chauffeur looked at him, and his face seemed to speak of surprise.

Crawley was smiling affably, but all the same his keen eyes were taking in every flicker of emotion on the face of Amiel.

"Why, I haven't seen Mr. Van Alstine this morning, sir. Perhaps he hasn't come downstairs yet."

"Still, would you mind seeing if he is about, for I like to get things off my mind with as little delay as possible?"

"Do you mean that you want me to go to the house and ask him about his intentions?"

"Yes."

"Very well, sir, I'll do it."

Amiel really made a move as if to start off.

"Wait, my friend. Perhaps after all it would be advisable to hold up a little. I'm not quite decided."

Amiel resumed his work, but showed signs of uneasiness, as though there was something about this stranger that mystified him.

CHAPTER XVI.

MOLLY AND THE KID.

"It didn't work!"

So Crawley said to himself when he failed to discover any trace of satisfaction upon the face of the man when he called him back.

If Amiel knew his employer was dead, and had only made a bluff of going to consult him, naturally it would be supposed that he must feel relief when the necessity no longer existed for this.

"Have you been with Mr. Van Alstine long?" Crawley asked.

"About seven months, sir."

"And were you a chauffeur before that?"

Amiel turned red, and then white.

He bent still lower, to reach a certain part of the machine.

"I worked in a repair shop for a while. That was the way I learned all about cars," he replied.

But the detective had noticed his confusion, and it had flashed upon him just where he had seen that face of Amiel's.

It was in the Rogue's Gallery!

Crawley had a wonderful faculty for remembering faces, and as he stood there looking at the worker he could distinctly recall what there was connected with the picture.

"May I ask your name, my friend?" he said.

The chauffeur was plainly alarmed by now, for these strange actions of the other must surely mean something.

"Amiel Stone, sir," he muttered, not even looking up.

"Thank you. I mistook you for another person. And the queerest part of it is that he had a scar, just as you have, on his left cheek!"

Amiel's hand trembled as he reached over to adjust some part of the machinery he had displaced.

"I don't suppose you ever happened to meet with any one named Andy Drake?"

The chauffeur groaned.

He got up from his knees and looked at Crawley; and if there was ever mortal distress stamped on the face of a human being it could be seen on his.

"Who are you?" he asked, huskily, his jaws set, and his eyes filled with such a look as may be seen in those of a cornered rat.

"Ah! I see then that I was right. Amiel, you do know something about Andy Drake? Perhaps you could even give me a tip so that I might find him?"

"It's no use, I guess. I might as well own up. Sooner or later, I knowed this would come. Now, what do you want with me?"

He stood there with a look of defiance on his face, and his eyes met those of Crawley in a steady glare.

"Then you admit that you are Andy Drake?"

"Oh! yes, if that will do you any good. I suppose you'll inform Mr. Van Alstine now, and lose me my job. They told me I'd be hounded by the police if ever I tried to play decent. And you must be a detective just looking for a chance to knock a feller like me into the ditch again."

He spoke bitterly, as though furious at the trick fate had played him.

"Hold on; no need of crossing a river before you come to it. First of all tell me why you've chosen to try and live an honest life, Amiel—I'll call you that because you prefer it."

"She got me to," muttered the other, still moody.

"Just as I thought. There never yet was a case of this kind but what petticoats could be found back of it. Now, who is she may I ask?"

"Molly, she's my wife," and he spoke the name rather tenderly.

"And I warrant a good wife too, Amiel. I don't understand though how Mr. Van Alstine came to employ you without references."

"He needed a man in a hurry, and my boss in the shop recommended me. That was the way of it. I'll hate to quit my job with him. It may be hard to get another if he won't give me a recommend. Are you going to tell him about this? For the sake of the little girl who pins her faith in me I'm going to beg of you not to betray me. I've been as square as a die ever since I got out, and that's nearly a year and a half ago."

Crawley saw that there was nothing doing in this quarter with regard to the discovery of the guilty one in connection with the tragedy of the *Black Cat*.

Amiel's whole manner told that he did not dream he no longer had an employer.

Still, he must soon learn the fact, since the county physician was doubtless even then on the way to the *Black Cat* to hold his customary inquest.

It would be better that the chauffeur should learn the bitter truth from a friend than any one else.

"I can easily promise you that. Amiel, for it wouldn't matter if a dozen told Mr. Van Alstine now. His ears are deaf to any sound!"

The other looked at him blankly.

"I don't understand," he said, slowly.

"Mr. Van Alstine is dead!"

The chauffeur trembled like an aspen-leaf. His eyes searched the face of the other hungrily, and yet with a look of impending dread in their depths.

"My God! sir, when did it happen?" he gasped, his lips trembling violently.

"Last night, or rather this morning at the time of the storm. So far his taking off is shrouded in mystery. All we know is that he was done to death with a heavy iron dog, part of the broken andirons belonging in his room, which some one apparently brought down upon his unprotected head with great force."

"Was—it a burglar, do you think, sir?"

"Not a thing was taken, so far as we can see. If it

was a thief who entered there then he must have fled, frightened at what he had done."

"And—you thought—considering my record, I might have done it? That's what a man gets when he's once been in prison. Poor Molly, poor little girl!"

His head fell on his chest, and it was apparently only with a great effort that he restrained the sobs that seemed to be shaking his form.

Crawley was sorry for the man.

He stepped closer, and his action must have been misunderstood, for Amiel shivered and quickly thrust out his hands.

"Put them on if you have to, but I swear I am as innocent as a babe!" he sighed.

To his astonishment he felt his right hand taken in a firm grasp and squeezed heartily.

"Look up, Amiel! Don't worry about this matter. I have no idea that you were concerned in this terrible affair. In fact, it has not yet been proven in my mind whether any one is guilty. If Van Alstine died at the hands of an intruder, there is one much more apt to be the culprit than you. And I'm going to keep your secret for the sake of Molly."

The chauffeur's face lighted up.

"God bless you for saying that, sir! I don't know who you are, but I'll never forget your face, never! All I want is the chance to make good. And I was doing it for Molly, and the kid. Thank you again and again for your kindness. Some time perhaps you might like to see my little nest, and the birds that have made a man out of a scamp."

"Indeed I should, and I will. If you are called upon to testify about this matter, all you have to say is the truth. No one need ever know about your past."

"Yes, sir. And so I've lost my position after all. He was very kind to me, and I'll miss him."

"As to a place, I happen to know that my friend Doctor Holmes has need of a chauffeur. He's here with me just now, and I'll speak to him about you. But in this case he must know the truth. I think he will respect you even more than he would a man who had never been tested in the fire."

"I'm glad I met you, sir, glad that since this sad news had to come it came from you. And you really don't suspect that I could have been guilty of trying to rob my employer? I've had dozens of chances, but I swore I'd cut my hand off sooner than yield, after she believed in me."

"That's all right, I know you didn't dream of it. Just keep your own counsel, Amiel. When you are called to testify, speak the truth. Now I'm going to the house. Do you know whether this man was in bed all night?" jerking his thumb over to where the hostler was working.

"So far as I know he was. If he went out he'd have to pass through my room, and I'm sure he didn't do that, sir."

"That's important, and I'm glad to hear it. I see plainly that I must turn to the last resort. Have you ever met Rudolph, the son of Madam Anton?"

"Just once, the last time we were out here for supper. I didn't fancy him. He is a bad egg. I could see the devil in his eye, and I ought to know a thief when I meet one. He's got it in him for keeps, I'd swear."

"I believe you're right. And if Rudolph didn't go into that room last night it was because he was afraid, or for some other cause, and not on account of any

honesty in his composition. I'll see you later, Amiel. My name is Jim Crawley!"

And leaving the chauffeur staring after him, for of course he had recognized that well known name, the detective headed for the house.

He meant to put a theory he had been forming of late to the test, and see whether the result would justify his suspicions.

CHAPTER XVII.

HEARD THROUGH THE TRANSOM.

Bob was sitting with the doctor on the porch.

The latter jumped up and greeted his friend with considerable enthusiasm.

"The same old story, it seems. Got your birds caged with ease. And I missed it all! I had been pluming myself on the fact that since we were yoke fellows on this vacation tour anything that cropped up must be shared in common," he exclaimed reproachfully.

"Wait. I've got something laid out for tonight, and you're going to be my side pard in it all. Just now these other matters must be subordinated to the one we have on our hands," remarked Crawley, soothingly.

"That's so, Jim," replied the doctor, smiling again.

"Did you get the coroner on the wire?"

"Yes, and he's on the way now, or will be shortly. He asked me several questions, as we are acquainted; but I put him off, and said he'd be able to hear all the facts in the case when he arrived; that you were working it up, and expected to be able to place the true solution of the mystery in his hands when he came."

The detective stroked his chin and looked at his friend.

"Well, all I can say is that you have the most colossal nerve. You know what a tangle this thing is in, and yet expect me to unravel it as easily as though things just jumped up into their regular places. In other words, you give me less than an hour to settle the entire matter, do you?" he demanded.

"That will be ample time," replied the doctor, calmly; "because I can see in your eyes that even now, sitting here as you are, you have a pretty strong idea as to where you can lay your hand on the guilty person. I'm not worrying about failure; not in the least."

"H'm! I see that I'll have to take to wearing glasses after this, if my eyes are so fond of betraying the secrets of my mind. But I'm famishing, and so is Bob, my worthy assistant, here. Where's the landlord? Hello! there M'siu, can we have breakfast at last?"

It was quickly forthcoming, also many apologies from Madam on account of the food having been kept warm so long after cooking.

"That was my fault, and I'm the one who should ask pardon," remarked Crawley; "still, the time has not been wasted, eh, Bob?"

The fat landlord eyed the young man askance. He could not understand how it came that the undesirable suitor seemed hand in glove with this wonderful gentleman who, with his doctor friend, had taken the solution of the mysterious crime on his shoulders.

Marie came upon the scene while they were eating and chatting.

The look of astonishment that filled her pretty face almost made Crawley laugh outright.

But he had warned Bob to make no demonstration such as might be calculated to stir up the anger of the innkeeper.

"Just be patient a little longer, and then perhaps when this load is taken from the mind of M. Anton he may be in a condition to forgive; especially when he learns that you are a nephew to Mr. Van Alstine," was what he said, and the young fellow acquiesced, although while they continued to partake of the food he cast many a longing look in the direction of the hovering Marie.

The detective meant to have one more interview before he called the account closed.

This was with Rudolph.

Used to studying men as he was, Crawley had seen that in the countenance of the bad step-son of the innkeeper that told him Rudolph was stretching the long bow at the time he so glibly told about his experiences when that heavy rumbling shock of thunder made the old road house quiver from top to bottom.

Plainly then he believed the man lied!

Moreover, he had a pretty strong idea that Rudolph was not in his bed at all at that moment.

Supposing that to be so, where would he have been apt to be found?

The narrow passage led to the square hall, and the door of the guest chamber had a habit of refusing to remain fastened, so that it was probably on the swing the better part of the night.

Nothing to hinder Rudolph from entering, was there, in case the notion came to him; and he would not be in that square hall at such an hour of the night unless some such idea was in his head.

So Crawley finished his breakfast in a shorter time than the others.

He wished to get through with this matter before the car of the county physician appeared.

Since Doctor Holmes had promised that he would have the whole mystery cleared up in time for the arrival of the coroner, it certainly behooved him to get to work.

Passing up the stairs he entered the narrow hall by means of which the rear room could be reached.

And as he arrived at a point close to its end he became aware of the fact that some one was in the room with Rudolph.

Voices came to his ears, one of them that of a woman; and remembering what the facts were he could easily understand that the visitor must be Annette.

She had finally made up her mind to seek out her son, and demand the truth.

Crawley came to a stand.

He found that he could hear what they were saying as well as though he stood in the very room.

The reason of this lay in the fact that above the door there was a transom, which, being slightly turned, served as a means of communication.

It was the voice of the man he caught first, and full of disgust.

"You make me sick, old woman! I tell you I never did that trick!" he was saying, vehemently.

"But you were out of your room last night, you know you was, Rudolph!" she flashed at him.

"What if I was? Suppose a fellow got thirsty in the night, and wanted a drink, wouldn't he just make a bee line for that bathroom, hey, tell me that?" was the way he snarled at her.

"But you didn't stop at the bathroom!"

"What's that?" demanded the other, quickly, and with a note of fear in his voice.

"You went on to the square hall, Rudolph, you know you did," she exclaimed.

At which he swore most vigorously.

"What're you saying that for? Want to get me in trouble do you? Now, why should you think I'd gone on past the bathroom and to the big hall? Tell me that, will you, old woman?" he demanded.

"I know," she replied, confidently, while the listener bent his ear so as not to lose a single syllable of this intensely interesting conversation.

"Did you see me?"

"No, no!"

"Did you hear me?" he pursued, as if determined to learn the worst.

"I am deaf, as you know. More than that even the thunder did not awaken me," replied the woman.

"Then how did you know I was there?" he demanded; "you must a dreamed it I tell yuh?"

"Look!"

"What is that?"

"It is a handkerchief with the little flower along the border, the only one of the kind you have."

"Well what of it?"

"I put it in the pocket of your clean pajamas before I carried them up to you last night, Rudolph!"

"The devil you say! What of that?"

"I found this, this morning."

"Where?"

"In the front hall!"

"Fiends take it, you'll have me hung yet, I see! In the square hall, you mean?" he growled.

"Just beside the door that leads into the room where last night death came. Oh! Rudolph!"

"Shut up, woman! D'ye want to call the detective up here, and hand me over to him? I tell you I never set a foot in that room. If somebody did for the old fool it wasn't me. Is that my kind? I'd had the game if I had to take the name. It wasn't me as plucked him on the head, not me!" he went on, fiercely.

"But you *did* go to his door—you wanted to steal from him—you've got to own up to that, Rudolph! It is in the blood! Your father was the same, and came to a bad end. You went there meaning to enter and rob our guest?" the woman went on hysterically.

"What if I did have a notion that it might be an easy job? I never touched the door even. Listen! I swear to you that just as I got in the hall that thunder clap made the house shake like it was coming down. Then something inside that room went over with a crash and a jingling like broken glass. I got cold feet

right away. I believed the jig was up, because that row must arouse the whole house. So I cut and run back to my room, and crawled in bed. I never got out again until it was daylight. D'yé hear me say that, woman? It's gospel truth!"

"Yes, oh! yes, but you *was* there, Rudolph. It looks like you had done it; and they'll say you did, no matter how you swear. I always said I'd live to see you hung, like—never mind who, and it's going to be so. Why don't you go away when you've got the chance?"

"Aw! rats! don't you see that's just what'd make it look like I done it. That detective said that if I skipped it'd be the worst thing in the world. After that nobody would believe that I hadn't dropped old Van with that iron dog. I wanter run; my legs is just itchin' to light out, but I don't dare, hang it!"

"But I've got the money for you to get away with!"

"That's all right. I'll take the spud easy enough, but about gettin' out, that's a different matter. I don't dare run away. I'm so near dead anyhow, that it wouldn't matter much either way. Let 'em gather me in if they has to. I'll have some fun out of what little life they's left to me."

His manner was defiant. He had no thought for the hysterical woman who had made so many sacrifices on the altar of her relationship to him.

Crawley had heard enough.

Such an interview, where the speakers were utterly ignorant of his presence, was worth more to him than half a dozen with the chances of a brazen lie obtruding its noxious presence to hide a motive.

He opened the door and stepped quietly into the room.

The landlady was on her knees beside the chair where the consumptive crook sat.

She had her face hidden in her apron, and was sobbing bitterly, so that she neither saw nor heard the entrance of the detective.

But Rudolph was different.

His staring eyes watched that door shove open, and greeting the coming of the man he believed he had good cause to fear above all others on earth.

"You—heard it all?" he exclaimed, drawing a big breath.

"All," replied the detective, grimly.

"And have you come for me now?"

The woman had by this time learned that some one else was present; she raised her head to gape at Crawley in abject terror.

From the first moment she had beheld this man she had conceived the dread for him that was inspired in her knowledge of her son's former wicked ways.

"I want to ask you one or two questions, Rudolph. Be careful how you answer them. Let there be no more lies, my man; or you will rue the day," said Crawley, sternly.

"Fire away. The game is up since you know I was out of my bed at the time that thunder came. I'm ready to tell anything I know; but it won't do any good, you see, 'cause I never set a foot in that room!"

"You were close to the door when the thunder shock the house?"

"Sure I was; I acknowledge the corn; and meanin' to take a look in too; only that scared me off," defiantly.

"The door was a little ways open?"

"I know it was; I seen it when the lightnin' came."

"You heard a crash in that room, such a noise as must have followed the fall of a big man like Van Alstine, together with the overturned table, the falling lamp, and the drop of the iron dog?"

"I reckon it was all that, for the racket was fierce."

"Did you hear a human voice call for help?"

"Nary."

"Did you see in that room when the flash came?"

"It fairly blinded me so I couldn't see nothing."

"And you immediately turned tail and ran off?"

"I certain did, 'cause I knowed right well the old man'd just feel like shootin' me full of holes if he found me there in that hall. I tore back to my room and made up my mind the game wasn't worth the candle. And that's the whole story, believe it if you want to, mister."

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE EXPLANATION.

Crawley stood there rubbing his chin, and the smile on his face grew broader.

For the moment he entirely forgot that a man and a mother were hanging on his words, and waiting to hear what might be the crack of doom for one of them.

He had grasped an idea, the one that had all along been eluding him persistently.

And somehow, whatever it was that obtruded itself upon his mind, caused him to smile.

In that minute of time he seemed to mentally review all the ramifications of the case, and find a place for each and every pawn.

He believed that the board was now in such a condition that it only required one more move on his part ere he could cry out:

"Checkmate!"

A sigh drew his attention to the others, and knowing what anguish that wretched mother's heart contained he could not find it in his soul to refuse her one word of consolation.

"I'm not going to arrest you, Rudolph; because I'm morally certain that this time you've told me the truth about this thing. But stay here in your room until I see you again. Madam, will you accompany me?" he said.

The landlady gained her feet, still trembling violently; still, she knew from what he had said that Rudolph was not to be disturbed, and that brought peace to her troubled soul.

So she trotted at his heels as he once more sought the taproom of the road house.

Here the doctor, Bob, and mine host were found, the latter busily engaged at his bar, and casting frowning glances in the direction of the young man whose presence at the inn he found objectionable.

Marie popped her head in at the door the moment the detective appeared, just as though she might have been expecting him.

"Doctor, Robert, I want you to accompany me upstairs for a minute or two. And will you kindly come also, M. Anton? I believe the end of this mystery is in sight!" Crawley said, gravely.

The landlord rubbed his hands together, and cast a side glance at his wife; it was as though he queried whether the solution would result in the arrest of his unwelcome guest in the shape of his step-son.

Such an event might bring him undue notoriety, but at the same time he would be relieved of an incubus.

They trooped up the stairs, Bob eager, the landlord curious, Madam trembling with anticipation, and the doctor confident in the sagacity of his friend.

Marie slipped after them, and Bob seeing her pale face could not keep from dropping in the rear so that he might throw an eager arm about her waist and whisper a few reassuring words in her pink ear.

Arriving in the square hall the detective took the key which the doctor had given back to his keeping.

Madam shut her hands hard, knowing that a gruesome sight was about to be presented to her; but not for worlds would she allow herself to be shut out from a participation in the promised exposure.

So they entered the death chamber, each one looking serious, and some of them a little white.

Bob had his arm about the waist of Marie with the air of one who felt the right of protection; and she clung to him most delightfully.

Neither M. Anton nor his wife noted the offensive fact; now they were shivering too much, and had eyes only for that terrible figure on the floor.

Upon entering the room the detective seemed to sweep his eyes around, and also up and down, as though he would cover every inch of space.

Then he smiled broadly.

"The dust on the floor meant something after all," he said, half aloud.

Annette moved close to the ample figure of the fat landlord; as for Doctor Fergus Holmes, he looked at Crawley with an amused expression on his face.

"I see he has found it out, even as I did," he remarked to himself, for he had heard those words.

The detective cast his eyes along the line of faces until he came to that of the inn-keeper.

"You are the one from whom I expect to get my positive information, M. Anton," he remarked, dryly; "so please pay attention to what I am about to say."

"Yes, sir," replied the other, watching the face of the gentleman closely.

Evidently he looked upon Crawley in the light of a necromancer, who was possibly about to drag a bloody assassin out from under the bed of the murdered man.

"You told me, I believe, that this andiron became broken some months ago—was that it?" asked the man with the keen eyes that seemed to bore through one.

"Yes, sir, that was true. Just three months ago it became broken, and I placed it away, intending to have it mended before it was needed again in this room in the fall," replied the other, steadily and precisely, as if he understood that much depended on his answers.

"The andirons belonged here?" with a movement of the extended hand toward the hearth, now screened with a large Japanese open umbrella, in glowing colors.

"Surely. We have another pair for the fireplace in the taproom. On cool nights we light a fire there, for the good cheer it seems to cast. People like to sit around it, and talk while they sip their drink."

"I understand all that; but M. Anton, what strikes me as strange is the fact that, finding the heavy iron base useless until it could be mended, instead of thrusting it in some closet you should go to the trouble of actually lifting it *to the top of that tall wardrobe yonder and leaving it there!*"

"But that was where I discovered both of them when I first took this house. I do not know why I put it back again when it became broken. But, sir, how—if it was up yonder how could the assassin ever lay hands on it to strike the fatal blow?"

"He did not do so! *There was no assassin!*" declared the detective, with thrilling emphasis.

"No assassin!" repeated the inn-keeper, helplessly, his mind as yet unable to grasp the true meaning of these words fired by the man in front of him.

"Listen to me, M. Anton. Your guest, Mr. Van Alstine, sat in that chair. He preferred to nap there to going to bed, being subject to asthma, I hear. So he put out his lamp and slept. Are you following me?"

"Yes, yes," came the answer, while every one leaned forward the better to hear.

"When that shock of rumbling thunder made the house tremble it dislodged that heavy iron base which, falling with terrible force, struck Van Alstine squarely on the head, crushing in his skull enough to bring instantaneous death, and just as he was springing up. You have been in this room again since I left, Doctor Fergus, and I knew from the expression on your face that you had solved a riddle that had been bothering you. It was in connection with the dust upon the floor. You even moved that chair, and stood on it to

see what marks there were on top of the wardrobe. Does my deduction agree positively with the conclusion you have formed?"

"To a dot! I suspected something of this sort when I examined the man's head, but since you did not ask me about his injuries I kept still, waiting for a chance to verify my suspicions. It is a clear case of accidental death; though I should think the coroner might see fit to take our friend the landlord to task for what is next door to criminal carelessness."

But M. Anton did not hear this last; he only realized that after all his house's fair name was cleared of the awful stain of murder!

He looked at his wife. She too was smiling now; but with her it was because the shadow of a crime did not hover over the head of the doomed man in the rear room.

Bob thought it was a good time to confess that he had taken his courage in both hands and married the girl on the sly; so when the little party gathered down below he led Marie before the couple and explained.

The detective stood by with Doctor Fergus, and put in a few good words for the youngsters. When M. Anton learned that Bob was really a nephew of the dead millionaire upstairs, and might come in for a share of his big estate, of course the last barrier went down; and he gave his blessing to the union that had already been consummated.

And just then a car stopped at the door, bringing the county physician and some others who might be useful in serving as his jury.

Both Jim Crawley and Doctor Fergus Holmes remained at the *Black Cat* that day. They gave their testi-

mony in such fashion that the verdict was "accidental death," and that ended the matter.

That same night the detective, aided and assisted by the doctor and Bob Anneston, managed to capture three other members of the gang, which event gave the young reporter a chance to add another chapter to his already big "scoop" in the newspaper world.

However, he hardly needed it, for his share of the Van Alstine fortune placed himself and Marie out of the laboring class forever.

Amiel easily satisfied the doctor as to his ability in the line of a chauffeur, and still holds down the job, trusted as few men are by his employer.

He has made good!

Three months after these events transpired Crawley learned that Rudolph Barthold had paid the debt of Nature.

THE END.

The next issue will be

Old Sleuth Weekly, No. 165.

Entitled

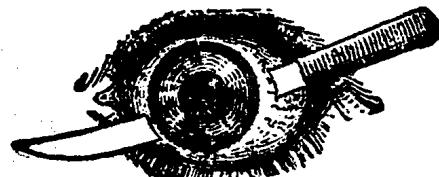
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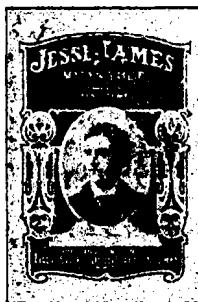
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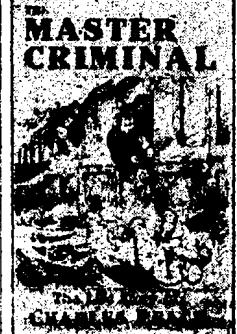
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LIST OF TITLES

No. 1.	THE OUTLAW'S PLEDGE	or the Raid on the Old Stockade
No. 2.	TRACKED TO HIS LAIR	or The Pursuit of the Midnight Raider
No. 3.	THE BLACK DEATH	or The Curse of the Navajo Witch
No. 4.	THE SQUAW MAN'S REVENGE	or Kidnapped by the Piutes
No. 5.	TRAPPED BY THE CREEES	or Tricked by a Renegade Scout
No. 6.	BETRAYED BY A MOCCASIN	or The Round-up of the Indian Smugglers
No. 7.	FLYING CLOUD'S LAST STAND	or The Battle of Dead Man's Canyon
No. 8.	A DASH FOR LIFE	or Tricked by Timber Wolves
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